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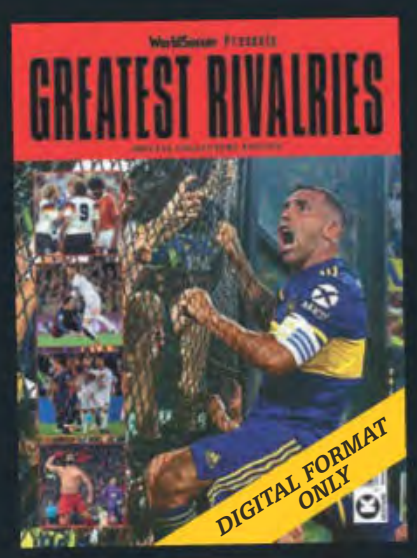

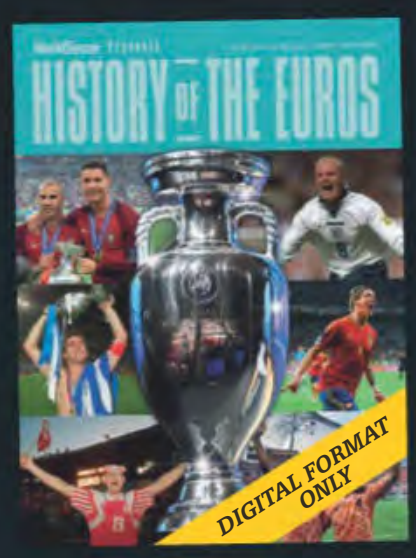

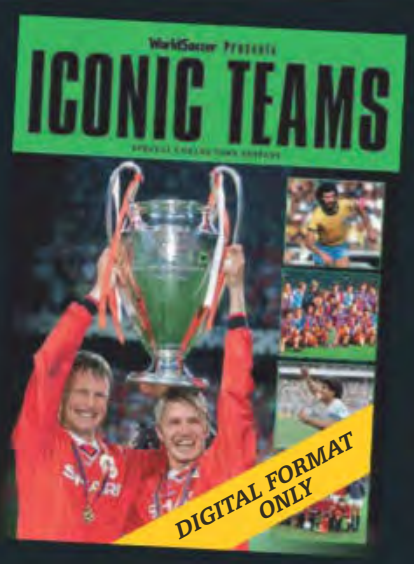

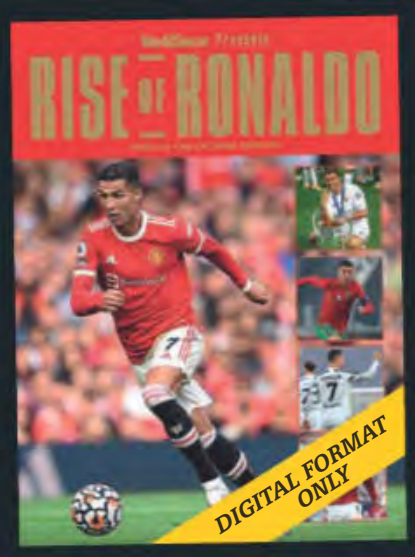

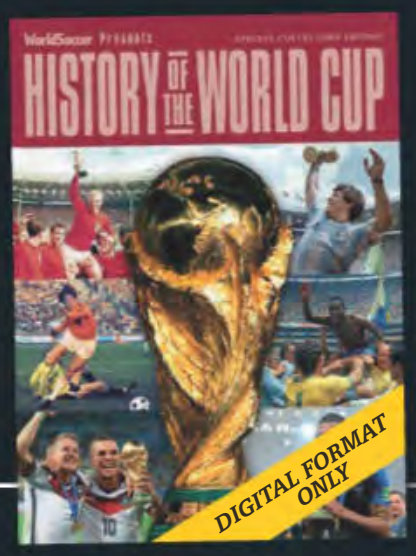

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In Pictures

The global game caught on camera

Serbia...the view inside the tunnel of Red Star Belgrade's Rajko Mitic Stadium ahead of their Champions League clash with Manchester City

France...Ethan Mbappe runs past older brother Kylian during his Ligue 1 debut for Paris Saint-Germain

Netherlands...Mats Grotenbreg celebrates scoring in non-league USV Hercules' shock Dutch Cup victory over Ajax

Italy...Genoa goalkeeper Josep Martinez looks on as his team's match against Internazionale is temporarily suspended due to smoke from fans' pyrotechnics

England...Manchester City players pose with the five trophies that they won in 2023 after adding the Club World Cup to their haul *(more on page 74)*

Turkey...fans protest against the cancellation of the Turkish Super Cup which was due to take place in Saudi Arabia *(more on page 17)*

Turkey...president of Turkish club Ankaragucu, Faruk Koca, throws a punch at referee Halil Umut Meler after his side's clash with Rizespor

Brazil...Palmeiras wonderkid Endrick celebrates winning the Brazilian championship *(more on page 76)*

Morocco...Napoli and Nigeria striker Victor Osimhen receives his African Men's Player of the Year award at the 2023 CAF Awards in Marrakesh

Brazil...Rio's Christ the Redeemer statue is lit up in memory of Pele on the one-year anniversary of his death

Thailand...Masahiro Sekiguchi, the captain of Japanese second-tier side Ventforet Kofu, addresses the team's fans after their progress to the AFC Champions League knockout stages ***(more on page 86)***

Mexico...Club America's Henry Martin and Miguel Layun celebrate after winning the Mexican Liga MX Apertura ***(more on page 82)***

Iran...female fans watch Persepolis face Al Duhail in the AFC Champions League. A week earlier, Iranian authorities allowed female fans to watch the Tehran derby between Persepolis and Esteghlal for the first time in more than 40 years

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FROM THE ASSISTANT EDITOR

In the last issue of *World Soccer* we looked back over the events of 2023, so it feels only natural that this time we should look ahead to 2024.

It is a year filled with both excitement and trepidation. On the one hand, we have four continental championships to take in (the Africa Cup of Nations and Asian Cup this month, and Euro 2024 and the Copa America this summer), as well as a number of exciting domestic stories unfolding across Europe. On the other, football's leaders, administrators and decision-makers continue to exasperate and infuriate supporters, coaches and players, with revised Champions League and Club World Cup formats on the horizon, not to mention renewed plans for a European Super League. Keir Radnedge and Nick Bidwell both take a look at all of these topics and more in their previews of 2024.

One thing that we can be sure of is that a new generation of superstars are just waiting to emerge, and we've selected 50 of the standout candidates to make a name for themselves in 2024. Picking out the talents of tomorrow has long been a speciality that *World Soccer* has prided itself on, so make sure you remember the names.

> One thing that we can be sure of is that a new generation of superstars are just waiting to emerge

We've also shone an extra spotlight on Liverpool superstar Trent Alexander-Arnold, who continues to be at the forefront of Jurgen Klopp's evolution of the team this season. If the Reds – and, perhaps, England – are to be successful in 2024, he will have a big say.

Amidst all this crystal-ball gazing, there's still room for a look back. Samindra Kunti was in Saudi Arabia to watch Manchester City lift the Club World Cup, Tim Vickery and Joel Richards tell the stories of South America's 2023 domestic leagues – with particular focus on Brazil and Argentina – and Mark Gleeson and John Duerden provide updates from the African and Asian Champions Leagues.

Jamie Evans, Assistant Editor

European super league...fans shot down the original proposals in 2021

EUROPE

European Super League still alive

A22, the group behind the latest proposals for a European Super League, are refusing to give up on their vision for a new competition after the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruled that FIFA and UEFA could not ban clubs from joining a breakaway competition.

A new format of a European Super League – which would include promotion and relegation and both men and women's competitions – was unveiled in December, shortly after the court ruling. A22's website states that: "UEFA's monopoly over European football has come to an end," and that "when clubs have greater choice and power over how football is managed, football is better."

Yet support remains limited, with Barcelona and Real Madrid the only clubs continuing to back the idea publicly. All six of the originally invited English teams (Manchester United, Manchester City, Liverpool, Arsenal, Chelsea and Tottenham) publicly stated their objections, as did Bayern Munich, Borussia Dortmund and Internazionale. The Italian FA (FIGC) released its own statement reiterating its objection to the Super League "for the good of Italian football."

Nasser Al Khelaifi, chairman of both Paris Saint-Germain and the European Clubs Association (ECA), was most outspoken in standing by UEFA. "We [the ECA] want to represent all the clubs. We all have the same interests," he said. "If they want to do their own competition, it is fine. But the best club competition in the world is the Champions League."

The debate is set to rumble on and on.

"I like that we finally get a bit of an understanding that FIFA and UEFA and other bodies cannot just do what they want"

Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp on the ECJ's Super League ruling

RUSSIA

RFU ends talk of leaving UEFA

The Russian Football Union (RFU) has voted unanimously against quitting UEFA, despite still being banned from European competition.

Following the invasion of Ukraine, all Russian teams were banned from FIFA and UEFA competitions, leading to speculation that Russia could leave to join the Asian Football Confederation instead. The national team was invited to play at the inaugural CAFA (Central Asian Football Association) Nations Cup last year, but ultimately declined.

"We have decided to continue contacts with UEFA, especially as there is progress," said RFU committee member Mikhail Gershkovich. "Let's see how the situation develops next year."

AFRICA

Osimhen crowned African Player of the Year

Victor Osimhen became the first Nigerian since Nwankwo Kanu in 1999 to be crowned African Men's Player of the Year at the CAF awards ceremony in December. The Napoli striker finished ahead of Morocco's Achraf Hakimi and Egypt forward Mohamed Salah in the voting. Barcelona Femeni forward Asisat Oshoala made it a clean sweep for Nigeria by winning the women's award.

OTHER 2023 CAF AWARDS WINNERS:

Coach of the Year (men):
Walid Regragui *(Morocco)*
Coach of the Year (women):
Desiree Ellis *(South Africa)*
Goalkeeper of the Year (men):
Yassine Bounou *(Al Hilal & Morocco)*
Goalkeeper of the Year (women):
Chiamaka Nnadozie *(Paris FC & Nigeria)*
Young Player of the Year (men):
Lamine Camara *(Metz & Senegal)*
Young Player of the Year (women):
Nesryne El Chad *(Lille & Morocco)*
National Team of the Year (men): Morocco
National Team of the Year (women): Nigeria
Club of the Year (men): Al Ahly *(Egypt)*
Club of the Year (women):
Mamelodi Sundowns *(South Africa)*

2024 Calendar

FEBRUARY

10 2023 Asian Cup final
11 2023 AFCON final
23 2023-24 Women's UEFA Nations League semi-finals
25 English League Cup final
28 2023-24 Women's UEFA Nations League final

Hosts and holders...Qatar won the 2019 Asian Cup

MARCH

21 Euro 2024 play-off semi-finals
2023-24 CONCACAF Nations League semi-finals
CONCACAF 2026 World Cup qualifying begins
Asian 2026 World Cup qualifying continues
24 2023-24 CONCACAF Nations League final
26 Euro 2024 play-off finals
31 Women's English League Cup final

APRIL

6 Spanish Cup final

MAY

11 Oceania Champions League begins
11/18 Asian Champions League final
12 Women's FA Cup final
15 Italian Cup final
18 Bundesliga final day
WSL final day
Ligue 1 final day
19 Premier League final day
19/26 African Champions League final
22 Europa League final
25 Women's UEFA Champions League final
FA Cup final
German Cup final
French Cup final
26 La Liga final day
Serie A final day
26 EFL Championship play-off final
29 Europa Conference League final

JUNE

1 UEFA Champions League final
2 CONCACAF Champions Cup final
3 African 2026 World Cup qualifying continues
14 Euro 2024 begins
15 OFC Nations Cup begins
20 Copa America begins

JULY

14 Copa America final
Euro 2024 final
24 Men's Olympic 2024 football tournament begins
25 Women's Olympic 2024 football tournament begins

AUGUST

9 Men's Olympic 2024 football tournament final
10 Women's Olympic 2024 football tournament final
14 2024 UEFA Super Cup

SEPTEMBER

TBC Oceania 2026 World Cup qualifying begins
2 South American 2026 World Cup qualifying continues
5 2024-25 UEFA Nations League begins
19 2024-25 UEFA Champions League group stage begins

NOVEMBER

23 Copa Sudamericana final
30 Copa Libertadores final

Copa Libertadores... will there be a sixth consecutive Brazilian champion?

DECEMBER

TBC 2024 FIFA Intercontinental Cup
2024 AFF Championship
26th Arabian Cup

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

The burning issues for 2024

Keir Radnedge identifies the questions that football will face in the year ahead

FINANCIAL FAIR PLAY

FFP should be a weapon of reassurance; not so while its administration remains subjective. The concept was Michel Platini's most important contribution during his ultimately doomed presidency of UEFA. He agonised over rich individuals swooping on clubs for their own nefarious reasons, creating sporting inequality and leaving bankruptcies in their wake.

Platini considered Roman Abramovich a worrisome example, fully justified by the accounting legacy that cost Chelsea one UEFA fine last July for "incomplete financial reporting" under the Russian's ownership. Beyond that, Manchester City face 115 Premier League charges – alleged breaches that they deny – though who knows when they may be resolved?

Both UEFA and the Premier League must address a perception that it's the vulnerable clubs (such as Football League founder members Everton) who are most easily scapegoated.

FFP protests... Everton fans at Goodison Park

Supporters will be unhappy to find some of the "glamour" ties away from home taken away, but UEFA needed a formula that combated the ennui of the group stage and continued to restrict Super League talk by putting more money into as many of the big clubs' coffers as possible.

> Manchester City face 115 Premier League charges – alleged breaches that they deny – though who knows when they may be resolved?

UEFA COMPETITIONS

This is a big 70th anniversary year for the European federation. First, Euro 2024 in Germany will generate record profits, TV and Internet ratings, then comes the launch of the reshaped Champions League.

The expansion from 32 to 36 clubs will be accomplished via a "Swiss model" format adapted from some tennis and chess tournaments. Clubs will be seeded according to their coefficient and play eight single group-stage matches against eight different teams rather than, as now, twice against three teams home and away. The top eight head direct into the knockout stage with nine to 24 playing off for eight other slots.

New-look format...2024 will see a new Champions League

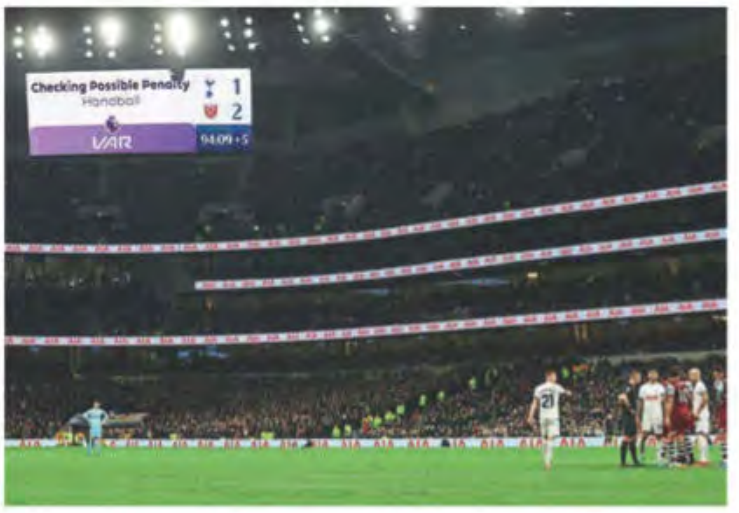
CORRUPTION

In all of its many forms, though match-fixing is the most insidious. Its rarity at elite level is deceptive. All investigations into the gambling maelstrom reveal the dangers out of sight, at lower level.

The Internet is its vehicle, enabling live, play-by-play betting from lower leagues in Europe and elsewhere. The gambler is not interested in the team identity, nor necessarily a match result. The 90 minutes of a match lend themselves to a myriad of opportunities. This is not match-fixing for promotion or relegation, this is all about the lure of the bet itself. Hence, alarm about the promotion of gambling *per se* through pitchside advertising and broadcasting "partnerships".

Corruption is not only about the pitch action, as the FIFAGate scandal of 2015 illustrated: a temptation will always exist to cream off a slice of the financial pie. Hard to spot, even harder to police.

Injured...Barcelona's Gavi and Real Madrid's Aurelien Tchouameni



Inconsistency...the interpretation of handball is causing confusion

PLAYER WELFARE

As the international federations squeeze more and more matches into the unbending 52 weeks of the year, the wellbeing of players is always the victim. The French players' union (UNFP) is the latest complainant to rage against failures in the duty of care. Real Madrid's Aurelien Tchouameni suffered a stress fracture of his left foot in the *Clasico* win over Barcelona, then club and national team-mate Eduardo Camavinga picked up a knee ligament injury in training while on international duty with France during Euro 2024 qualification. A string of other stars, including Spain midfielder Gavi and Brazil forward Vinicius Junior, contracted the so-called "FIFA virus".

The UNFP complained: "For years, the UNFP and FIFPRO have been sounding the alarm, denouncing the overworking of players, which endangers not only their physical health but their mental health too.

"Injuries in the post-World Cup period are only the first signs of an even deeper crisis that will also end up damaging the spectacle. It is about time we stopped carrying on regardless and respond to the calls for a redesign of the international calendar."

Hopefully these words may no longer fall on deaf ears. But that is just New Year optimism talking. There is a particular reason players are shut out of the committees running international football. No prizes for guessing the answer.

SPORTSWASHING

The question of sportswashing is set to become ever more urgent. This is no new phenomenon. It can be traced right back to the 1930s and the propaganda attraction to Benito Mussolini of Italy's staging of the 1934 World Cup, and even more notoriously Nazi Germany's manipulation of the Olympic Games in Berlin two years later.

Every host nation invests heavily in showing its best face to the world for the few weeks of a sports show. Qatar took it to a new level with the 2022 World Cup, and Saudi Arabia will strive to go even better in 2034.

The Saudi strategy is not only being implemented via sport but through business, political and international relations. But football is a wonderful short-cut to visibility: Saudi has appreciated how Qatar emerged with a positive balance from a World Cup investment, which it assessed as outweighing the human rights negativity.

Sportswashing, like it or not, will continue to win the battle off the pitch.

LAWS OF THE GAME

On the pitch, the laws of football will doubtless undergo further fiddling and meddling. Shame. It would make sense for the International Board to enact definitive change only once in a World Cup cycle and allow referees, players and fans to just get on with the game for four years.

IFAB's most important changes have been the offside law adjustment (from three players to two) in 1925 and banning the back-pass in 1992. Goal-line technology, video assistance and semi-automated offside have been innovations not laws. But more work is essential on the application of VAR and the interpretative inconsistencies around handball, notably. Clearly, it's a nonsense when assessments of handball and stoppage-time vary from tournament to tournament.

FIFA

Many of the game's ills land at the door of the world governing body. These are the areas on which it should be seen to focus most attention – for the sake of the game's long-term credibility rather than its cash flow. This was the overwhelming interpretation of the rush to Saudi Arabia's financial oasis.

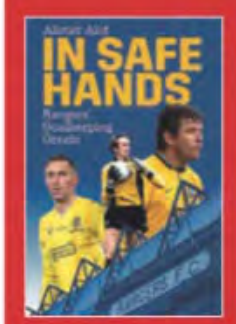
Gianni Infantino is secure in his presidential office for the foreseeable future. He has a free hand to address all the above. The ball is in his court, for good or ill. He has the votes, he has the power. Hopefully he will start to wield it for the good of the game at large. Or is that too much to expect?

FIFA president...Infantino at an IFAB meeting

BOOKS THIS MONTH

A SPRINKLE OF MAGIC
By Aaron Moore (Pitch Publishing, £12.99)

A Sprinkle of Magic tells the fascinating stories of non-league clubs who defied the odds and dared to dream big in the world's oldest cup competition. Dating back to the 2009-10 season, the stories include FA Cup runs from Redbridge, Bath City, Stourbridge, AFC Totton, Hendon and, of course, Lincoln City, who became the first non-league side to reach the FA Cup quarter-finals in more than a century in 2017.



IN SAFE HANDS
By Alistair Aird (Pitch Publishing, £25)

In Safe Hands is the story of Rangers' goalkeepers from the Scottish club's origins back in 1872 through to the modern day. This exhaustive account charts the contribution each and every keeper made to the rich history of the Gers, brought to life by personal insights and reflections from Rangers players past and present. There is also a poignant tribute to the late Andy Goram, arguably the greatest Rangers goalkeeper of all time.

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Barcelona's attempt to wind the clocks back

But Joan Laporta is perhaps misguided in hoping to recreate the success of his first spell at the club

The good news for Barcelona is that they're in the knockout phase of the Champions League for the first time in three seasons and that, while they're facing the Italian champions, Napoli are nothing like the force they were last season. And... well, that's about it. By every other metric – league form, finances, tactical development – they're struggling.

Defeat to table-topping Girona followed by a 1-1 draw at Valencia meant that Barca went into Christmas fourth in La Liga, seven points behind the surprise leaders. They only lost twice in the league in the first half of the campaign, and the financial stratification of Spanish football means that Champions League qualification remains almost guaranteed, but performances were poor. Even the likelihood that Girona will stutter at some point is little cause for optimism.

The finances remain a basket case. The debt remains at €1.2 billion. Although the club made a profit of €98 million last season, that was largely the result of the sale of €727m of non-sporting assets, some of which will impact the club's capacity to generate revenue in the future. This season, playing at Montjuic while the Camp Nou is redeveloped, a profit of €11m is projected, but that is predicated on reaching the quarter-final of the Champions League. Their first-team budget is set at €270m (compared to €727m for Real Madrid) but even though a lot of high earners have been offloaded, spending on the squad is still €492m – which is problematic in that it means Barca can only spend a third of what they can prove they are saving. That, necessarily, limits manoeuvrability – which is a problem with Robert Lewandowski, now 35, beginning to show his age.

Struggling Barca... performances have underwhelmed so far this campaign

Last season, president Joan Laporta took a big gamble in pulling so many financial levers, essentially mortgaging the future of the club. He was hoping that by investing in the squad despite the financial problems he could generate greater revenues with on-field success – as he did in 2004, the last time he saved the club from crisis.

> The situation now is reminiscent of 20 years ago, as Laporta himself acknowledged

The situation now is reminiscent of 20 years ago, as Laporta himself acknowledged by talking about the need to sign an Edgar Davids figure. The Netherlands midfielder's arrival in January 2004 allowed Xavi to move further forward and ignited the Frank Rijkaard reign as Barca climbed from seventh to second. The following season they won the league and the one after that the Champions League, inaugurating the era that would culminate in the two Champions Leagues won under Pep Guardiola.

That seemed to reaffirm the Barcelona philosophy. Guardiola was a disciple of Johan Cruyff who had established the Barcelona style, first as a player in the 1970s and then as a manager in the late '80s and early '90s. Laporta is clearly a believer. Before he turned to Rijkaard in 2003, he approached Guus Hiddink and Ronald Koeman. He wanted somebody steeped in the Dutch tradition. Rijkaard was far from

Under pressure ...Barca boss Xavi

an obvious choice, having led Sparta Rotterdam to the first relegation in their history in his only club role. But he had the necessary Ajax connections and eventually, for two seasons, prospered, paving the way for the Guardiola era, the most successful in the club's history.

The only coaching experience Guardiola had, notoriously, was one season in charge of Barcelona's B team, and Laporta has seemingly tried to replicate that with Xavi. Given how he played the game, as almost the physical embodiment of the Guardiola philosophy, the assumption was that he would be an effective coach despite his relative lack of experience: two seasons at Al Sadd in Qatar.

But there has been little yet to suggest that Xavi might excel as a coach. There have been a lot of words about playing the game the right way; he can certainly quote the philosophy but there is little evidence yet that he can implement it, let alone adapt to circumstance. Last season's league title was a grind and while La Liga titles might not have become quite such a debased currency as championships in Germany or France, neither is it a guarantee of greatness. What was notable, in fact, was how limited Barca looked in the Champions League last season, overwhelmed by Bayern and then outthought and outfought by Inter.

They did finish top of their group this season, but that might mean more had they not lost away games to Antwerp (admittedly with qualification secured) and Shakhtar. The defensive solidity that underpinned last season's league title seems to have evaporated, and there is little evidence of them having developed any greater creativity. With Gavi having suffered torn cruciate ligaments and out for the season, that leaves Oriol Romeu as the only real holding player in the squad, raising major doubts about the midfield.

Laporta needs to get the virtuous cycle turning soon. It's true that two decades ago, movement came suddenly and unexpectedly, but there is little evidence something similar is imminent. Hoping past paradigms recur perhaps isn't the safest way of running a football club.

REPORTS WE COULDN'T MAKE UP

Split return... Kalinic is back at his hometown club once again

1 SPLIT SALARY

Six months after leaving Hajduk Split, former Croatia striker Nikola Kalinic is back at his hometown club for a third spell – on a deal that will pay him just €1 (86p). He made his Hajduk debut the season after their last league triumph back in 2004-05, and has since played for the likes of Atletico Madrid, Blackburn Rovers, Milan, Roma and Fiorentina, before returning to Hajduk in 2022. Having been a free agent since July, the 36-year-old rejoined with the team top of the league by six points.

2 SILLY SMALL PRINT

No modern signing is complete without the obligatory social media snap of the player or manager putting pen to paper on their new contract, and Dean Smith's arrival at Charlotte FC was no different. A close-up of the image, however, suggests that such photos are more about style than substance. As well as stating that Smith will "be on the touchline for Charlotte FC matches", the terms also say that club mascot Sir Minty – a giant walking football that wears a cape and crown – is allowed "a recurring weekly meeting" with the new manager. The final line adds: "Legally, we need to state clearly that this is in fact not an official document. Anything agreed to here is null and void. Sorry."

3 BELFAST UNITED FC

Belfast came close to having its own Premier League team in the late 1990s, according to newly released papers. Previously confidential documents reveal that then-Prime Minister Tony Blair was keen on a proposal for Wimbledon to be relocated to the Northern Irish capital and renamed Belfast United. Discussions also included plans for a new 40,000-seater stadium and an academy for sport, with the proponents believing that the move would "provide a positive unifying force in a divided city". The idea was ultimately rejected, and Wimbledon instead announced their intention to relocate to Milton Keynes in 2001.

4 TEN IS THE MAGIC NUMBER

Argentina's plans to retire Lionel Messi's No.10 shirt may come unstuck. AFA president Claudio Tapia recently declared that: "When Messi retires from the national team, we will not allow anyone else to wear the number ten," however such a move would require special dispensation from FIFA. Indeed, ahead of the 2002 World Cup, Argentina tried to honour Diego Maradona in the same way, only for FIFA to insist that the number ten be assigned to somebody, and it was eventually worn by Ariel Ortega.

5 GOALSCORING GOALIE

With almost an hour of Arbroath's Scottish Championship clash with Raith Rovers played, manager Jim McIntyre had a dilemma. His injury-hit squad had just picked up another casualty, and his only option on the substitutes' bench was back-up goalkeeper Ali Adams. With no other option, McIntyre sent Adams on to make a nuisance of himself up front, but the 32-year-old did so much more. With 14 minutes left on the clock, the goalie swivelled on a bouncing ball from 25 yards out and unleashed an unstoppable dipping volley into the Rovers net.

6 TURKISH TENSION

The Turkish Super Cup between Galatasaray and Fenerbahce, which was set to take place in Saudi Arabia at the end of December, was postponed after an argument between the two teams and the hosts. The row erupted after Saudi authorities refused to allow the players to enter the pitch under a banner of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, Turkey's first president and founding father. The Riyadh Season, organisers of the match, claimed that it had been agreed with the clubs that the game would be staged "without any slogans outside its scope". On their return to Turkey, the teams were greeted by hundreds of fans waving the Turkish flag and carrying pictures of Ataturk.

7 STILL GOT IT

Finally, credit to Navutoka striker Lui Muavesi, who fired his team to the Tonga Major League final against Veitongo at the ripe old age of 58, collecting the league's Golden Boot with 18 goals in the process.

"Football is a results business…however, time is the most precious commodity a manager requires and I do not believe 13 weeks was sufficient to oversee the changes that were needed"

Wayne Rooney reacts to being sacked as manager of Birmingham City after just 15 games

IN

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

37 Moves That Caught Our Eye This Month

OUT

EUROPE

BRYAN ZARAGOZA
The Granada and Spain star will join **Bayern Munich** on a five-year deal this summer.

DONNY VAN DE BEEK
Eintracht Frankfurt signed the Dutchman on loan from Manchester United until the end of the season, with a permanent option included.

CLAUDIO ECHEVERRI
Manchester City paid £21.7 million to sign the exciting Argentine teenage playmaker, who will stay at River Plate for next season.

ELJIF ELMAS
RB Leipzig paid €24m to capture the North Macedonian attacking midfielder from Napoli.

FABIO SILVA
Rangers signed the striker on loan from Wolves.

LUCAS BERALDO
Paris Saint-Germain landed the 20-year-old Brazilian centre-back from Sao Paulo.

CARLO ANCELOTTI
The Italian coach signed a new contract keeping him at **Real Madrid** until 2026, thereby ending speculation that he will join Brazil this summer.

NUNO ESPIRITO SANTO
The Portuguese coach replaced Steve Cooper as manager of **Nottingham Forest**.

QUIQUE SANCHEZ FLORES
The former Getafe and Watford manager took charge of **Sevilla** to replace Diego Alonso.

JAN SIEWERT
After seven games as interim boss, **Mainz** appointed Siewert as their permanent coach.

STEFFEN BAUMGART
Bundesliga strugglers **Cologne** parted company with their head coach.

RIZA CALIMBAY
Besiktas sacked their manager after falling 15 points behind league leaders Fenerbahce.

NURI SAHIN
Sahin left his job as Antalyaspor boss to join **Borussia Dortmund** as assistant coach.

GAUTE HELSTRUP
Tromso fans were stunned after their head coach left to become assistant at rivals **Bodo/Glimt**.

ERIC BAILLY
Villarreal re-signed their former centre-back after the Ivorian was released by Besiktas.

FERNANDO
The Brazilian midfielder terminated his deal with **Sevilla**, with a move to Vasco da Gama expected.

GELSON MARTINS
Once a €30m signing from Atletico Madrid, the Portuguese winger left Monaco for **Olympiakos**.

ARNOR SIGURDSSON
Blackburn Rovers signed the Iceland attacking midfielder permanently from CSKA Moscow.

BILLY SHARP
The former Sheffield United striker returned to England from LA Galaxy to join **Hull City**.

MICHAEL BEALE
Sunderland hired the ex-Rangers boss to replace Tony Mowbray as manager.

WAYNE ROONEY
Birmingham City sacked the former England captain after only 15 games as manager.

CHARLIE ADAM
The ex-Stoke midfielder took his first steps as a manager, replacing Lee Johnson at **Fleetwood**.

TROY DEENEY
Forest Green Rovers appointed the centre-forward as their new player-manager.

DIRK KUYT
The former Liverpool forward replaced Andreas Wieland as coach of **Beerschot**.

FABRIZIO COSTANTINI
Costantini left his role as **San Marino** coach.

ASIA

KEVIN MUSCAT
Shanghai Port hired the Australian shortly after his departure from Yokohama F. Marinos.

LLUIS CORTES
The former head coach of Barcelona Femeni took charge of **Saudi Arabia's women**'s team.

FRANK DE BOER
The former Crystal Palace manager was sacked by UAE outfit **Al Jazira** after only 14 games.

MIODRAG RADULOVIC
The Montenegrin boss took charge of **Lebanon** after managing his home country for three years.

MARCO TULIO
The Brazilian forward left A-League champions Central Coast Mariners for Japan's **Kyoto Sanga**.

SOUTH AMERICA

NICOLAS DE LA CRUZ
Brazilian giants **Flamengo** signed the Uruguay attacking midfielder from River Plate for $16m.

GABRIEL HEINZE
The former Argentina defender stepped down from his role in charge of **Newell's Old Boys**.

CONCACAF

GIORGIO CHIELLINI
After 18 months in MLS with **LAFC**, the ex-Italy and Juventus defender retired from football.

HUGO LLORIS
Chiellini was replaced as **LAFC**'s high-profile European player by the former France captain.

Farewell… Lloris waves goodbye to Tottenham

EMIL FORSBERG
After nine years at RB Leipzig, the Sweden winger left to join **New York Red Bulls**.

DEAN SMITH
MLS side **Charlotte FC** appointed the former Brentford and Aston Villa boss as manager.

JOSEF MARTINEZ
The Venezuelan left **Inter Miami**, paving the way for Luis Suarez's arrival at the club.

"About Brazil, I don't know if it's true or not, they didn't talk to me"

Roma boss Jose Mourinho on rumours linking him with the Brazil job after Carlo Ancelotti was ruled out of the running

The month in numbers

The facts and stats that have caught our eye in the world of football this month...

Welcome to Manchester...a billboard announcing Sir Jim Ratcliffe's arrival at United

£1.03bn

Price that Sir Jim Ratcliffe paid the Glazer family for a 25 per cent stake in Manchester United.

8

Goals scored by Solomon Islands striker John Orobulu at the 2023 Pacific Games, the tournament's top scorer.

29

Years that Hong Kong had to wait to beat China – a wait that came to an end in January after a friendly in Abu Dhabi between the neighbouring countries.

3

Confirmed bids to host the 2027 Women's World Cup, with Brazil competing against joint-bids from Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands, as well as Mexico and the United States.

5

Players to have hit over 150 Premier League goals for one club, after Liverpool's Mohamed Salah joined Thierry Henry, Wayne Rooney, Sergio Aguero and Harry Kane in passing the milestone.

5

Minutes that it took for Mary Earps' England Women's goalkeeper shirts to sell out after they went on sale in December.

1

Rebecca Welch made history by becoming the Premier League's first-ever female referee when she officiated Burnley's 2-0 win at Fulham in December.

History maker... Rebecca Welch

59,042

Crowd that watched Arsenal thrash Chelsea 4-1 in the Women's Super League in December, a new record.

11

League goals scored by Bologna's Lewis Ferguson – the most by a Scottish player in Serie A history.

15

Goals conceded by Manchester United during their campaign in this season's Champions League – the worst-ever group-stage performance by an English club.

8

Manchester City players nominated for the Men's FIFA FIFPro World XI for 2023. In the women's category, the Lionesses also had eight nominees.

10

Foreign players that Saudi Pro League clubs will be able to register from the 2024-25 season, after the league's foreign player quota was increased.

54

Goals that Cristiano Ronaldo scored in 2023, more than any other player. With 52 strikes, Harry Kane was the top-scoring player from a European league.

2025-26

Season that Everton will move into their brand-new Bramley-Moore Dock stadium.

4

FIFA Club World Cups that Karim Benzema has scored in after he netted for Al Ittihad at the 2023 tournament. No player has scored in more editions of the competition.

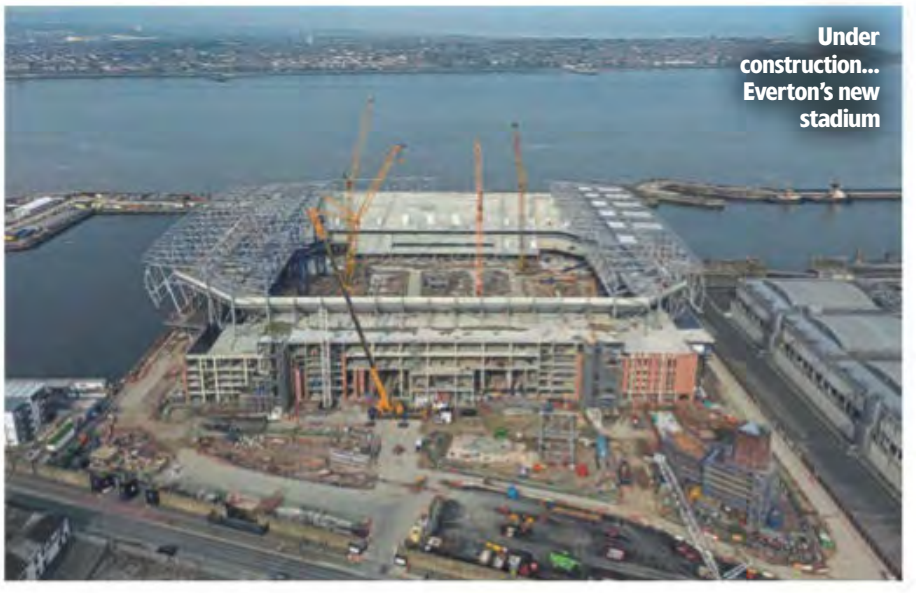
Record breaker... Benzema celebrates scoring against Auckland City

34

English clubs that joined the newly-formed Union of European Clubs in December.

£702m

Money spent on agents' fees in international transfers in 2023, according to a report from FIFA.



Under construction... Everton's new stadium

"In Europe we are lucky, but it's important that we make football really global and this creates a chance for other clubs to progress. It will give more opportunities to more players all over the world"

Arsene Wenger, FIFA's chief of global football development, on the expanded Club World Cup in 2025

Back at Wembley

The UEFA Champions League final heads back to Wembley for a record-extending eighth time

Wembley...the last Champions League final held in London was back in 2013

Champions League

ROUND OF 16 FIRST LEGS

FEBRUARY 13
FC Copenhagen v Manchester City
RB Leipzig v Real Madrid

FEBRUARY 14
Lazio v Bayern Munich
Paris Saint-Germain v Real Sociedad

FEBRUARY 20
Internazionale v Atletico Madrid
PSV v Borussia Dortmund

FEBRUARY 21
Porto v Arsenal
Napoli v Barcelona

MARCH 5
Bayern Munich v Lazio
Real Sociedad v Paris Saint-Germain

MARCH 6
Manchester City v FC Copenhagen
Real Madrid v RB Leipzig

MARCH 12
Arsenal v Porto
Barcelona v Napoli

MARCH 13
Atletico Madrid v Internazionale
Borussia Dortmund v PSV

QUARTER-FINALS
DRAW: March 15
FIRST LEGS: April 9-10
SECOND LEGS: April 16-17

SEMI-FINALS
DRAW: March 15
FIRST LEGS: April 30-May 1
SECOND LEGS: May 7-8

FINAL
JUNE 1
Wembley Stadium, London

Europa League

KNOCKOUT ROUND PLAY-OFFS
FIRST LEGS: February 15
SECOND LEGS: February 22
Feyenoord v Roma
Galatasaray v Sparta Prague
Shakhtar Donetsk v Marseille
Young Boys v Sporting
Benfica v Toulouse
Braga v Qarabag
Lens v Freiburg
Milan v Rennes

EIGHT GROUP WINNERS ADVANCE DIRECTLY TO THE ROUND OF 16
West Ham United, Brighton & Hove Albion, Rangers, Atalanta, Liverpool, Villarreal, Slavia Prague, Bayer Leverkusen

ROUND OF 16
DRAW: February 23
FIRST LEGS: March 7
SECOND LEGS: March 14

QUARTER-FINALS
DRAW: March 15
FIRST LEGS: April 11
SECOND LEGS: April 18

SEMI-FINALS
DRAW: March 15
FIRST LEGS: May 2
SECOND LEGS: May 9

FINAL
MAY 22
Aviva Stadium, Dublin

Europa Conference League

KNOCKOUT ROUND PLAY-OFFS
FIRST LEGS: February 15
SECOND LEGS: February 21-22
Molde v Legia Warsaw
Olympiakos v Ferencvaros
Sturm Graz v Slovan Bratislava
Union Saint-Gilloise v Eintracht Frankfurt
Ajax v Bodo/Glimt
Maccabi Haifa v Gent
Real Betis v Dinamo Zagreb
Servette v Ludogorets

EIGHT GROUP WINNERS ADVANCE DIRECTLY TO THE ROUND OF 16
Lille, Maccabi Tel Aviv, Viktoria Plzen, Club Brugge, Aston Villa, Fiorentina, PAOK, Fenerbahce

ROUND OF 16
DRAW: February 23
FIRST LEGS: March 7
SECOND LEGS: March 14

QUARTER-FINALS
DRAW: March 15
FIRST LEGS: April 11
SECOND LEGS: April 18

SEMI-FINALS
DRAW: March 15
FIRST LEGS: May 2
SECOND LEGS: May 9

FINAL
MAY 29
Agia Sophia Stadium, Athens

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

Yann Sommer (Internazionale)	12
Marcin Bulka (Nice)	6
Lukas Hradecky (Bayer Leverkusen)	6
Wojciech Szczesny (Juventus)	6
Alisson (Liverpool)	3
Kepa Arrizabalaga (Real Madrid)	1
Ederson (Manchester City)	1
Kamil Grabara (Copenhagen)	1
Emiliano Martinez (Aston Villa)	1
Manuel Neuer (Bayern Munich)	1
Jan Oblak (Atletico Madrid)	1
Andre Onana (Manchester United)	1
Ivan Provedel (Lazio)	1
Marc-Andre ter Stegen (Barcelona)	1

DEFENDERS

Alex Grimaldo (Bayer Leverkusen)	18
Trent Alexander-Arnold (Liverpool)	11
Jonathan Tah (Bayer Leverkusen)	10
Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	10
Jeremie Frimpong (Bayer Leverkusen)	8
Kyle Walker (Manchester City)	7
Dani Carvajal (Real Madrid)	6
Federico Dimarco (Internazionale)	6
Bremer (Juventus)	5
Antonio Rudiger (Real Madrid)	5
Cristian Romero (Tottenham Hotspur)	4
Jean-Clair Todibo (Nice)	4
Micky van de Ven (Tottenham Hotspur)	4
Francesco Acerbi (Internazionale)	3
Joao Cancelo (Barcelona)	3
Alphonso Davies (Bayern Munich)	3
Gabriel (Arsenal)	3
Federico Gatti (Juventus)	3
Achraf Hakimi (Paris Saint-Germain)	3
Odilon Kossounou (Bayer Leverkusen)	3
Ben White (Arsenal)	3
Ronald Araujo (Barcelona)	2
Alessandro Bastoni (Internazionale)	2
Dante (Nice)	2
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	2
Denzel Dumfries (Internazionale)	2
Josko Gvardiol (Manchester City)	2
Mario Hermoso (Atletico Madrid)	2
Mats Hummels (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Nicolas Otamendi (Benfica)	2
Benjamin Pavard (Internazionale)	2
William Saliba (Arsenal)	2
Kieran Trippier (Newcastle United)	2
Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)	2
Axel Witsel (Atletico Madrid)	2
David Alaba (Real Madrid)	1
Waldemar Anton (Stuttgart)	1
Sam Beukema (Bologna)	1
Olivier Boscagli (PSV)	1
Andreas Christensen (Barcelona)	1
Yan Couto (Girona)	1
Oscar De Marcos (Athletic Club)	1
Stefan de Vrij (Internazionale)	1
Eric Garcia (Girona)	1
Miguel Gutierrez (Girona)	1
Piero Hincapie (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Jules Kounde (Barcelona)	1
Tino Livramento (Newcastle United)	1
Koki Machida (Union Saint-Gilloise)	1
Nahuel Molina (Atletico Madrid)	1
Luca Ranieri (Fiorentina)	1
David Raum (RB Leipzig)	1
Nico Schlotterbeck (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Edmond Tapsoba (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Filippo Terracciano (Verona)	1
Jordan Teze (PSV)	1
Fikayo Tomori (Milan)	1
Destiny Udogie (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Leny Yoro (Lille)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Jude Bellingham (Real Madrid)	33
James Maddison (Tottenham Hotspur)	9
Rodri (Manchester City)	8
Florian Wirtz (Bayer Leverkusen)	7
Martin Odegaard (Arsenal)	6
Hakan Calhanoglu (Internazionale)	4
Toni Kroos (Real Madrid)	4
Jamal Musiala (Bayern Munich)	3
Adrien Rabiot (Juventus)	3
Declan Rice (Arsenal)	3
Dominik Szoboszlai (Liverpool)	3
Vitinha (Paris Saint-Germain)	3
Phil Foden (Manchester City)	2
Aleix Garcia (Girona)	2
Yangel Herrera (Girona)	2
Douglas Luiz (Aston Villa)	2
John McGinn (Aston Villa)	2
Henrikh Mkhitaryan (Internazionale)	2
Ismael Saibari (PSV)	2
Bernardo Silva (Manchester City)	2
Joey Veerman (PSV)	2
Nicolo Barella (Internazionale)	1
Giacomo Bonaventura (Fiorentina)	1
Thomas Delaney (Anderlecht)	1
Wataru Endo (Liverpool)	1
Rasmus Falk (Copenhagen)	1
Chris Fuhrich (Stuttgart)	1
Gavi (Barcelona)	1
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	1
Teun Koopmeiners (Atalanta)	1
Takefusa Kubo (Real Sociedad)	1
Mohammed Kudus (West Ham United)	1
Ivan Martin (Girona)	1
Weston McKennie (Juventus)	1
Scott McTominay (Manchester United)	1
Kaoru Mitoma (Brighton & Hove Albion)	1
Lucas Paqueta (West Ham United)	1
Tijjani Reijnders (Milan)	1
Rodrigo Riquelme (Atletico Madrid)	1
Xavi Simons (RB Leipzig)	1
Granit Xhaka (Bayer Leverkusen)	1

FORWARDS

Harry Kane (Bayern Munich)	27
Erling Haaland (Manchester City)	13
Kylian Mbappe (Paris Saint-Germain)	11
Serhou Guirassy (Stuttgart)	9
Rodrygo (Real Madrid)	9
Mohamed Salah (Liverpool)	9
Son Heung-min (Tottenham Hotspur)	8
Victor Boniface (Bayer Leverkusen)	5
Antoine Griezmann (Atletico Madrid)	5
Artem Dovbyk (Girona)	4
Viktor Gyokeres (Sporting)	3
Alvaro Morata (Atletico Madrid)	3
Julian Alvarez (Manchester City)	2
Jeremy Doku (Manchester City)	2
Santiago Gimenez (Feyenoord)	2
Leroy Sane (Bayern Munich)	2
Jarrod Bowen (West Ham United)	1
Edin Dzeko (Fenerbahce)	1
Evanilson (Porto)	1
Mauro Icardi (Galatasaray)	1
Romelu Lukaku (Roma)	1
Bukayo Saka (Arsenal)	1
Savio (Girona)	1
Patrik Schick (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Dominic Solanke (Bournemouth)	1
Marcus Thuram (Internazionale)	1

ESM MEMBERS: *A Bola* (Portugal), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *Sport/Foot* (Belgium), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *Tipsbladet* (Denmark), *ELF Voetbal* (Netherlands), *World Soccer* (England)

eye witness

Tim Vickery reports

BRAZIL

Frightening future for relegated Santos

The club that was formed the day the Titanic went down has finally been relegated. Santos suffered a traumatic last round of the Brazilian Championship. In a night full of ebbs and flows, they ended up being overtaken by Bahia and Vasco da Gama and finished in one of the dreaded last four positions. And this happened in the first season after the death of Pele, whose mausoleum overlooks the club's Vila Belmiro stadium. The timing, then, was cruel indeed. But this was a matter of time, and the only surprise is that people are surprised. Because Santos was always a miracle.

Every other major club in Brazil is based in one of the giant state capitals. Santos is an exception. The city is a port that, on a good day, is about an hour's drive down the hill from the metropolis of Sao Paulo. The population of Santos does not get to half a million. Greater Sao Paulo has somewhere around 20 million. The fact that Santos were able to compete with the clubs from the big city for so long is extraordinary. But Santos went further, not just holding ▸

Relegated...Santos have dropped out of the top tier for the first time in their history

their own against the likes of Corinthians and Palmeiras but overshadowing them, becoming by far the best known Brazilian team abroad and probably for a while the greatest side in the world. And so much of this, of course, has to do with Pele.

And the story here is blessed with a happy accident. Santos overcame the big boys to be crowned champions of Sao Paulo state in 1935. The next time it happened was 1955. So, when the adolescent Pele stepped into the first team the following year, he was surrounded by quality. One of Brazil's superb attacking trio from the 1950 World Cup, Jair Rosa Pinto was the wise old head. Pagao was a centre-forward of rich skill and technique, a perfect strike partner for the young Pele. On the left wing was Pepe with his cannonball shot. And there was the magnificent Zito, who was to spend the next decade being Brazil's central-midfield enforcer. These great players helped Pele bed in, and soon, as he quickly took the game by storm, most of them transformed into part of his supporting cast as Santos became known all over the planet.

It is well worth looking up the highlights of the night they beat Benfica 5-2 in Lisbon at the end of 1962 to become world club champions. Pele is in his prime, the team are firing on all cylinders and up to that point, football had arguably never been played better. True, it was a different era – Ipswich Town were champions of England at the time – but even then, size mattered. Santos had to pay Pele and his club mates, many of whom were with him when Brazil won the World Cups of 1958, 1962 and 1970. How to meet the wage bill when they were a small-city club with a low-capacity little stadium? Playing the odd showpiece game in Rio's giant Maracana was an occasional help, but never a long-term solution.

And so, in one of the most influential decisions in the history of club football, Santos declined to take part in the Copa Libertadores after 1965. In an age before the TV money was rolling in, the Libertadores was a sure loser, with long, expensive journeys and only one game at the end of them. The rational response was to organise tours of friendlies – the whole world wanted to see Pele and company – where more games could be crammed in. And so, Santos became a footballing version of the Harlem Globetrotters. The downside was that this left the Libertadores open to domination by Argentina at a time when the game there was at its most cynical – and as a consequence the Club World Cup (or Intercontinental Cup), initially so promising and potentially so exciting, quickly lost its lustre. The upside was that so many people were able to see them, especially in Africa, where they staged a number of tours.

But the Pele era could not go on forever. In October 1974, after 18 years in the white shirt (or the black and white stripes), Pele said goodbye to Santos and the club was left with the impossible task of trying to get by without him.

Inevitably, Santos slipped back, but there was no immediate danger. During the 1970s the Brazilian Championship was vastly inflated – up to 42 teams in 1975 and rising to a barely credible 94 in 1979. Santos were only three points clear of the drop in a slimmed down competition in 1986, but it is only in the current century, with a perhaps excessive number of four clubs going down, that relegation has become a genuine threat for even the biggest of Brazil's clubs. Now that it has happened to Santos, just Flamengo and Sao Paulo remain as the only teams to have never experienced life in the second division.

The excellence of their youth development work helped Santos stave off their fate for longer than might have been expected. The first triumph of the post-Pele era was the Sao Paulo State Championship of 1978 when, under the command of former centre-back Chico Formiga, Santos won with a team based on the so-called "*Meninos da Vila*" –

World tour... Pele during one of Santos' friendlies in the 1960s

the boys from the Vila Belmiro. In the 21st century, there would be more generations of *meninos* in a process that started almost by chance.

Eliminated early from the 2002 Sao Paulo Championship, coach Emerson Leao had time to prepare for the national league, and became enchanted with the youngsters at his disposal. He built a side around the teenage talents of Diego and Robinho, supported by the likes of Elano, Renato, Alex and Leo. With not a player over the age of 27 they won the league, and the next year, returning to the Libertadores for only the second time in almost four decades, they reached the final. There was another league title in 2004, and then the next generation, spearheaded by Neymar, won the Libertadores in 2011.

Neymar stayed for another two years, but his lengthy spell in Brazil increasingly seemed to belong to the past. The best talent since then, Rodrygo, spent little more than a year in the first team before moving to Real Madrid. The big European clubs wanted to take South American wonderkids as early as possible, and the economic context was obliging Santos to sell. Recent products have been on their way before the club has derived much benefit from their presence on the field. And selling clubs inevitably reach a tipping point when they are unable to replace the talent they have lost.

It is no coincidence that the same clubs are monopolising the major titles in Brazil. Financial gaps have opened up in the past few years as income has poured in from TV and sponsorship deals – as well as from ticket sales as crowds have grown, with membership schemes doing much to do away with the traditional mentality of the fan picking and choosing the games attended. Average attendances in the 2023 season hit a record figure of over 26,000 – much higher than the capacity of Vila Belmiro. Traditionally Santos have taken advantage of the popularity from the Pele years to go up the hill and stage some matches in Sao Paulo's Pacaembu Stadium. But following a privatisation, the ground has been closed for reforms, making it even harder for Santos to compete against clubs with far bigger resources and catchment areas.

The last gasp was a superb 2019 season under Jorge Sampaoli, when Santos finished second, and the following year under Cuca they went on an extraordinary run all the way to the final of the Libertadores. But the club was by now punching absurdly above its weight. Since then, there have been eight coaches and three different caretakers.

Talent factory... (clockwise) Elano, Neymar, Rodrygo and Robinho all graduated from Santos' academy

All of this instability is not the cause of the decline of Santos, but a symptom of the actual reason: the almost impossible task of a small club trying to compete against the giants while burdened by unrealistic expectations handed down from the past. After all, we are no longer in the era when Ipswich Town can realistically hope of winning the English title, or when Nottingham Forest can dream of landing the Champions League. Their supporters appreciate this reality. It is harder for Santos fans to do likewise, as was made clear by the furious reaction to relegation, with cars and buses set on fire and clashes with the police.

> A small club trying to compete against the giants while burdened by unrealistic expectations handed down from the past

So, what does the future hold? Football finance specialist Rodrigo Capelo fears that of all the recent relegations in Brazilian football, the case of Santos is the worst. There are no more parachute payments, and relegated clubs miss out on any performance-related TV money. Santos have not qualified for the 2024 Brazilian Cup, and they have already spent much of the money set aside for the season. The past of Santos could not be more glorious, but the future is a worrying place.

eyewitness

Danny Lewis reports

CANADA

Here comes the Cavalry

2024 is set to be a big year for Canadian Premier League side Cavalry FC

The breadth of Cavalry FC's successes can be perfectly encapsulated in a four-day period during the middle of December. On the 13th, the club had the monumental moment of being included in a CONCACAF Champions Cup draw for the first time, pitted against Orlando City. Mere days earlier, their former player Mohamed Farsi helped Columbus Crew overcome Los Angeles FC to lift the MLS Cup, doing so just three years after a two-week trial helped the full-back earn a contract at Cavalry.

With the Calgary-based club now in the same competition as Ballon d'Or holder Lionel Messi, head coach and general manager Tommy Wheeldon Jr. enthuses that it's "fantasy stuff". That isn't just the case for Wheeldon, as the club has allowed fans to dream and offered players a platform to reach their aspirations.

It's been an action-packed five years for Cavalry since the inception of the Canadian Premier League (CPL), with Wheeldon admitting that building his squad for the inaugural campaign was "a bit like playing fantasy football but real life."

As many FPL managers can relate, the Englishman largely went for what he knew. He had led Calgary Foothills to the Professional Development League title in his final season with the club and took 12 of their players along with him for the new venture.

He and Cavalry appreciated that it was vital to get off to a quick start. "We have to embrace that, as a

Cavalry boss... Tommy Wheeldon Jr.
Credit: Cavalry FC

Premier League Shield...Cavalry lift the trophy
Credit: Cavalry FC

Key goal...Cavalry celebrate scoring against Forge FC
Credit: Cavalry FC

> "It starts with the ownership group and translates all the way down to the players and the staff that help out. A winning mentality"
> **Cavalry midfielder Eryk Kobza**

country that's still learning to be a domestic sport professionally, we're still having to attract fans one by one," Wheeldon says. "How to do it? You give them a great experience when they walk through the door, but you also want to attach them to a winning brand and we knew right from the get-go, we had to win."

They did just that, being victorious in both the spring and fall campaign during the inaugural season, then coming top during the shortened 2020 term. Even so, the most important victory of the club's early stages came against MLS outfit Vancouver Whitecaps in the 2019 Canadian Championship.

"We tied at home, it was a sell-out that day, and everyone thought, 'that was a great result because this is a team that's established, but when they go to BC Place they're probably going to get beat'," Wheeldon recalls. "We actually used that and I remember that game – it'll still be one of my highlights. By beating them, I think we announced the CPL as a better league than people thought it was."

Since their early league victories, neither of which were rewarded with a trophy, Cavalry had to be patient in their pursuit of reaching top spot again. They still always finished within the top three, played in the play-offs and helped players to progress their careers.

As well as the aforementioned Farsi, Joel Waterman and Victor Loturi moved to CF Montreal and Ross County respectively, which has helped the pair earn a place in the Canada national team. They have been joined on the international stage by Dominick Zator, who moved to fellow CPL side York United before joining Polish top-flight outfit Korona Kielce.

Aribim Pepple moved to Luton Town in 2022 (and is currently on loan at National League side Bromley), while the latest departure has seen Goteh Ntignee join Ligue 2 club Annecy in a CPL record deal.

"It's been a really good journey and I think there's more in our depth chart now as we build our U21 team, our U15s and U17s," Wheeldon enthuses. "I think there's a lot of talent here in Calgary and Alberta. This is just the start of many more good players coming out of this production line."

In addition to creating a route through the age groups, Cavalry have found success in utilising the CPL-U Sports Draft, where players can be recruited from Canadian universities. "What's great about U Sports is you get intelligent minds because they're studying," Wheeler explains. "They're also great at time management because they have to play in a university season and still keep up with their academics and balance a social and family life. So, when they come into a full-time professional set-up, they're probably the easiest ones to teach."

Eryk Kobza is the latest Draft pick to progress under Wheeldon's tutelage. Looking back at the time he signed a U Sports contract in April last year, the 22-year-old admits: "I was hoping for about 14 appearances and maybe about five to ten starts." Across the regular season and play-offs he made a total of 29 appearances, with only three of those coming from the bench, earning a professional contract and playing a key role in a Cavalry side that went on to finish top of the league by 13 points.

Kobza feels that he and other players coming through have been helped by "the culture of the club" and its "winning mentality". He continues: "It starts with the ownership group and translates all the way down to the players and the staff that help out. A winning mentality, wanting to work together, striving to succeed every day."

Kobza's arrival coincided with Cavalry's best CPL season to date, as they finished top of the table by 13 points – and, unlike their first two table-topping seasons, this time they were recognised with a trophy, the CPL Shield. Their excellence was reflected

Cavalry graduates... Joel Waterman and Mohamed Farsi

in the league's awards, as Wheeldon won Coach of the Year, Daan Klomp was named both Defender and Player of the Year, Ali Musse won Players' Player of the Year, while Myer Bevan was the league's joint-highest goalscorer alongside Atletico Ottawa's Ollie Bassett.

Kobza says: "I know they're individual awards, but I feel like if you ask any of those guys, they're not doing it without the 30 players at training day-in and day-out at Spruce [Meadows, the club's stadium and training ground]." He adds that being around that calibre of player has helped his development: "I was honestly trying to be a sponge and soak up as much information as I can to help myself and hopefully in the future, but also last season for the immediate next game."

Wheeldon says that building that mentality is "a daily thing". He adds: "You walk into Spruce Meadows and everything has class, elegance and excellence, and we live that in the locker rooms. On the training pitch, it's super competitive, and even when our coaches tables are away, just playing a fun game of cards, the players see how competitive we are.

"So, when you draft an Eryk Kobza and he walks into our four walls, he knows that, from day one, he has to compete for a spot." The 22-year-old's first season at CPL level can now inspire the club's latest Draft picks, defender Caden Rogozinski and midfielder Rodane Cato.

They and everyone at the Cavs will hope to help replicate the club's CPL Shield lift, a moment that Wheeldon looks back on with fondness: "To share that with our fans – especially as you had the young soccer kids who you're paving the dreams for running on the pitch – to the supporters groups being around us, the family we grabbed onto the stage and the ownership group that was around it, that will go down as one of the best moments of my career."

The main thing that has evaded Cavalry in their five-year history is a play-off victory, despite coming closer than ever in 2023. In the final against Forge FC, Musse opened the scoring in the 11th minute of extra-time before Beni Badibanga's audacious goal was followed by Tristan Borges scoring directly from a corner to complete an incredible turnaround.

Even amid disappointment around the result, Wheeldon recognises that those moments can be positive for the league. "When you see, unfortunately, the goals that killed us in the play-off final, they become viral and they're an important part of our launch strategy. We have to grab people's attention."

He says that the continued pursuit of that trophy "keeps us hungry", while adding, "if that's the last thing then we've had a very, very successful run because we've also, in that time, sold some of our better players."

Kobza embodies that approach with his own aspirations. "The season we had was incredible, but you always shoot for more. I think the winning mentality at Cavs is clear," he says. "The goal is to do the double and definitely get into the Champions Cup for the following season. For me personally, it's to keep growing and keep developing. I know within myself, I want to kick on and push myself to see what level of football I can get to in the world. So, I think this is the perfect spot for me."

Wheeldon is also optimistic about the future of his group of "trailblazers". He says: "We're making sure that this initial first eight to ten years sets the tone for the future so that we know that we're going to be around, so the kids that come to watch us now, they'll pass it down to their kids and it becomes generational."

Draft pick... Eryk Kobza
Credit: Cavalry FC

A NEW DAWN FOR CONCACAF CLUBS

The newly reformatted CONCACAF Champions Cup begins in February

Words: James Nalton

CONCACAF's premier international club competition has a new name for 2024 along with an extra round of games to accommodate more teams. The tournament is returning to its original Champions Cup moniker, which it had until 2008 before being renamed the CONCACAF Champions League.

The expansion makes for an even more diverse tournament. There are representatives from all corners of the region, which in this confederation, and in this particular competition, spans all the way from Vancouver on the west coast of Canada to the Surinamese capital Paramaribo on the northeast coast of South America.

UNITED STATES

Though it is generally more diverse, there is also an overload of teams from the United States in the 2024 tournament. This is partly down to the creation of the Leagues Cup competition, played in 2023 for the first time exclusively between teams from MLS and Liga MX. It offered three Champions Cup qualification spots and, as it turned out, American MLS clubs claimed all three.

A total of nine MLS teams from the US will enter this 27-team tournament and, with Vancouver Whitecaps qualifying via the Canadian Championship, there are ten MLS teams present in total.

The winner of the inaugural Leagues Cup, Inter Miami, got a bye to the last 16. They are one of five teams to do so from what has been deemed one of five major qualifying routes along with the winners of the Caribbean Cup, Central American Cup, Liga MX (the highest-placed champion in the overall aggregate points table) and the MLS Cup play-offs.

Inter Miami finished 27th out of 29 teams in the overall MLS table in 2023, some way off MLS play-off qualification, but the creation of this new tournament gave them a path to the Champions Cup despite their disappointing MLS season.

More pertinently to the wider world football narrative, it meant there was a chance for Lionel Messi to compete in the region's continental tournament. It was a chance he and Inter Miami took

A new dawn... Hidalgo Stadium, home of Mexican 2022-23 Apertura champions Pachuca

with both hands, lifting the Leagues Cup and marking a triumphant arrival for Messi on American shores. His and Miami's presence in the Champions Cup also offers an opportunity for 2025 Club World Cup qualification – a tournament that will also be played in the US.

The other two teams to qualify via the Leagues Cup were runners-up Nashville and the winner of the third-place match Philadelphia Union (who would have qualified via the MLS standings anyway).

The other team from MLS to go directly to the last 16 is Columbus Crew, who won the MLS Cup in style under head coach Wilfried Nancy. The presence of the Crew's attacking verve in this tournament brings a different kind of intrigue and anticipation to that provided by Messi's headline presence. Something to look out for in this tournament will be whether Nancy can get his team to exhibit on the continental stage the same courageous approach and style they showed on the domestic scene. It will certainly add to the fun if they can.

The winners of the MLS Supporters' Shield, FC Cincinnati, have every right to feel aggrieved that their league title triumph, coming on the back of season-long consistency and quality, is not deemed worthy of a bye to the last 16.

Houston Dynamo were the winners of the United States' national cup competition, the US Open Cup, and also enter in the first round thanks to that achievement (incidentally, there is uncertainty over this route to the Champions Cup in the future after MLS announced that its clubs would not take part in the 2024 Open Cup). They will be part of an all-American first-round tie in which they face the regular season winners of the MLS Western Conference, St Louis City, the expansion side that finished top of their conference in their first-ever season in MLS.

The presence of Columbus Crew's attacking verve in this tournament brings a different kind of intrigue and anticipation to that provided by Messi's headline presence

Orlando City qualified via the overall standings having finished runners-up to Cincinnati, while sixth-place New England Revolution join the fun as the next best team in the Supporters' Shield standings to have not already qualified.

Ones to watch... Columbus Crew were highly entertaining MLS Cup winners

MEXICO

Though Mexico's Liga MX has a different season structure to MLS, consisting of two separate league stages – an Apertura and a Clausura – there are similarities in the way Champions Cup qualification was decided.

There is the shared qualification path of the Leagues Cup, but only Monterrey made it to the semi-finals of that tournament. They subsequently lost to Philadelphia Union in the third-place game, so no Mexican teams could capitalise on that tournament's Champions Cup offerings.

Monterrey did still qualify, but via a domestic route. They were the leaders of the aggregate table from Liga MX's 2022-23 Apertura and Clausura combined but, as with Cincinnati in MLS, did not get a bye to the last 16 and instead will enter in the first round.

Mexico's pass to the last 16 went to the highest-placed winner of either of the Liguilla (play-off) phases of the Apertura and Clausura. Pachuca took this spot courtesy of winning the Apertura play-offs and finishing third overall, three places above Clausura champions Tigres UANL.

The runners-up from each of the phases, Toluca and Chivas Guadalajara respectively, join Tigres in the Champions Cup first round, as do Club America, who were the other qualifier via aggregate table standings having finished second overall.

The inclusion in the first round of some of the more consistently good teams from the past year or so does mean it boasts a range of quality and diversity from the outset in these ties, which will be two-legged knockouts until a single-match final.

Club America recently completed a double triumph in the 2023-24 Liga MX Apertura, finishing top of the standings and winning the Liguilla. Not only does this mean Club America have already qualified for the 2025 Champions Cup, but it also sees them go into the 2024 edition in good form.

Their star striker and Liga MX 2022-23 Balon de Oro winner, Henry Martin, finished top of the goalscoring

Star attraction... Lionel Messi's Inter Miami qualified via the Leagues Cup

Standout tie... Tigres will take on Vancouver Whitecaps in the first round

charts in the recent Apertura play-offs, while team-mate Julian Quinones also finished 2023 as one of the best players in the league.

CANADA AND THE CARIBBEAN

One of the big first-round clashes pits Tigres against the best team in Canada in 2023, Vancouver Whitecaps. Under head coach Vanni Sartini, the Whitecaps placed highest of the Canadian teams in MLS and also won the Canadian Championship, which involves teams from MLS, the Canadian Premier League (CPL), and the semi-pro League 1 Canada.

The other Canadian teams to qualify, who don't compete in MLS, did so via the CPL route. Cavalry FC from Foothills County, Alberta, near Calgary, finished top of the league to win the CPL Shield, and Forge FC of Hamilton, Ontario, won the post-season play-offs to become overall champions. Both enter in the first round and face Orlando and Chivas respectively.

Along with the Leagues Cup, the qualification paths for the re-structured edition saw the creation of two other newly-named tournaments: the Central American Cup and the Caribbean Cup.

These replace previous similar tournaments based in these regions, making for a more straightforward qualification process for the expanded Champions Cup.

This year's Champions Cup features a CONCACAF team from the South American continent for the first time since 2014-15, when Guyana's Alpha United took part. Surinamese side Robinhood won the Caribbean Cup, which they qualified for thanks to triumphing in the Caribbean Shield, so there is some depth to this particular qualification route.

Robinhood were formed in Suriname's capital city, Paramaribo, in 1945 with the aim of providing recreation for poorer residents and creating a community spirit through football. That backstory of providing for the poor might also be an indication as to the origin of their rather unique name.

Robinhood's Caribbean Cup win sees them bypass the first round and go straight through to the last 16.

Runners-up Cavalier FC of Jamaica enter the first round along with Moca FC from the Dominican Republic who won the third-place play-off and complete the Caribbean contingent.

CENTRAL AMERICA

Two of the qualifiers from the Central America region were the last teams not from Mexico or the US to win the tournament. Both are from Costa Rica. Alajualense won the tournament in 2004 and go straight to the last 16 in 2024 as Central American Cup champions. They are joined by Saprissa, who won in 2005 and qualified this time via the play-in round, which involved defeated quarter-finalists in the Central American Cup. Comunicaciones of Honduras were the other team to enter via this route.

Reaching the semi-finals in that competition was enough to qualify for the first-round stage, which is what Independiente of Panama and another Costa Rican outfit, Herediano, did. Runners-up Real Esteli from Nicaragua have the considerable task of playing Club America in the first round.

The number of qualification paths and the different forms they take is itself an indication of how varied and unusual this region and tournament can be. It makes for an inimitable international club competition that has contributed to the word "CONCACAF" almost becoming an adjective in soccer parlance.

Changes to the form and structure of a tournament can sometimes be for the worse or feel abrupt, but this new-look Champions Cup appears refreshed and inclusive of all corners of the region that it is meant to encompass. The proof will be in the playing rather than the previewing, but it promises plenty of intrigue for football fans as we watch it unfold.

CONCACAF CHAMPIONS CUP

FIRST-ROUND DRAW (ties take place February 2024)

- **Saprissa** v **Philadelphia Union**
- **Herediano** v **Toluca**
- **Real Esteli** v **Club America**
- **Forge** v **Chivas Guadalajara**
- **Independiente** v **New England Revolution**
- **St Louis City** v **Houston Dynamo**
- **Vancouver Whitecaps** v **Tigres UANL**
- **Cavalry** v **Orlando City**
- **Comunicaciones** v **Monterrey**
- **Cavalier** v **FC Cincinnati**
- **Moca** v **Nashville**

BYE TO LAST 16 (ties take place March 2024)

- **Pachuca**
- **Inter Miami**
- **Robinhood**
- **Columbus Crew**
- **Alajuelense**

MALI
KONE
BISSOUMA
20
DIGITAL

AFRICA'S NEARLY MEN

Mali are finally ready to convert youth-level promise into senior success

Words: Oluwashina Okeleji

Africa's performances on the global stage at Under-17 and Under-20 levels have long underlined the continent's standing as a hotbed of talent. Since the inaugural edition of the Under-17 World Cup in 1985 (in its previous guise as the Under-16 World Championship), African nations have achieved medal finishes on 17 occasions – including seven wins – in 19 tournaments. In the Under-20 equivalent, there have been ten African medal finishes since 1977, with Ghana claiming the title in 2009.

For all that, Africa has yet to translate that success into silverware on the world stage at senior level. The continent's nations that have won medals at both youth-level tournaments have, at least, gone on to represent Africa at the senior World Cup or found joy at the Africa Cup of Nations – all, that is, but one. Both Nigeria and Ghana have made inroads at the World Cup, while Ivory Coast (Under-17 bronze medallists in 1987) and Egypt (Under-20 bronze medallists in 2001) have also qualified, but Mali have failed to get off the ground at all.

It is not even true to say that the talents unearthed at Under-17 and Under-20 levels have not lived up to the billing: Mali boast some of the finest African footballers of the past 20 years, including Seydou Keita, Mahamadou Diarra, Mohamed Sissoko and Adama Coulibaly, while the current crop of Sekou Koita, Diadie Samassekou, Falaye Sacko and Amadou Haidara

Bronze medal...Mali players celebrate at the 2013 Africa Cup of Nations in South Africa

are all playing in top European leagues.

On the senior international stage, however, the pinnacle of Malian achievement – apart from finishing as AFCON runners-up in 1972 – is two third-place finishes in 2012 and 2013, and fourth place in both 2002 and 2004. It is, relative to their promise, a portrait of underachievement that is a result of the sheer weight of expectation, according to captain Hamari Traore.

"When we do well at youth tournaments, everyone sees the potential and talent in Mali," the Real Sociedad full-back tells *World Soccer*. "Sometimes it becomes a big pressure and affects the team.

"Everybody sees Mali do well in the Under-17 and Under-20 World Cup, but they want to see Mali playing the FIFA World Cup too. When we do that then Mali will be respected like Ghana, Cameroon, Morocco, Senegal or even Nigeria at the world level."

It is instructive that Traore does not include Tunisia, who have been one of the continent's mainstays at the World Cup. It is for good reason: the manner in which Mali missed out on the last finals in Qatar was particularly tragic. Having negotiated the second round of qualifying (a four-team group stage) without defeat and without so much as conceding a goal, they faced a play-off against the Carthage Eagles.

Over a tense, gruelling 180 minutes, only one goal was scored. Unfortunately for Mali, it was a first-half own-goal by Moussa Sissako in the first leg, handing Tunisia a priceless away goal and an aggregate lead they would not relinquish for the rest of the tie.

"We were so close," says defender Mamadou Fofana, who plays for French second-tier side Amiens. "It was painful because we played better than them, yet we failed to score." Traore puts it even more poignantly: "Whenever we hear 'Tunisia', it sounds like a terrible trauma for us as a team and country."

It was a trauma that this Mali side had to confront once more, after being drawn against Tunisia yet again at the current AFCON in the Ivory Coast.

The positive, as Traore tells it, is that Mali are now "very familiar" with Tunisia, although to fixate on the North Africans could be a mistake, what with South Africa and Namibia – neither of whom are pushovers – making up the rest of Group E.

The bigger picture though, and perhaps the key to dealing with their Tunisian trauma, is that this Mali squad has one eye firmly trained on the 2026 World Cup.

Mali began their bid to make their World Cup debut in Canada, Mexico and the United States somewhat shakily. The Eagles beat Chad 3-1, but a 1-1 draw against Central African Republic on home soil has them looking up at early pace-setters Comoros, with matches against Ghana and Madagascar still to come.

"We have not started [World Cup qualifying] to our satisfaction," admits Traore. "To play in the World Cup you must win all your home matches and hope for some wins or draws away from home to consolidate. We learned again quickly that other teams also have dreams of playing at the World Cup. Why not them?

"To deny teams like Ghana who are experienced at this level is not enough. Comoros have won two matches at home against Ghana and Central African Republic, while teams like Madagascar and Chad are also difficult."

The sentiment holds true at the AFCON as well, where Mali are contending with a difficult group.

> "For our generation, we do not want to be remembered as the 'nearly team.' We want to fulfil that dream of playing at the World Cup"
>
> **Mali captain Hamari Traore**

"We know that African football has changed a lot, and we no longer have small teams like people would think of Namibia. We are in a tough group. The AFCON is a tournament that gives no room for second chances. If you don't take your chances, you'll pay dearly for it.

"But the AFCON is also a big platform to get in shape and produce good performances. Tunisia is a very difficult and bad memory for us, but you know we have to put that behind us, we have to be very smart.

"The last play-off is in the past now, we have the future in front of us and we have to perform better than that. We only need to focus on ourselves and not allow external expectations or criticism to affect us."

There is, however, internal expectation. The recently-concluded 2023 Under-17 World Cup in Indonesia saw a talented Mali team finish third, playing a bright, breathless brand of

football and hammering pre-tournament favourites Argentina 3-0 in the third-place play-off; more grist to the mill for Malian football, but also a new generation aiming to make an impression at the next World Cup.

"When you look back at your career, you want a moment to look back on and be proud of," says Traore. "I haven't had that moment yet with Mali in the AFCON or World Cup. Others before us played the AFCON final and lost, the big brothers finished third twice in 2012 and 2013. What do I want to be remembered for? We all need a better story than our big brothers.

"They paved the way for us to be here and we also need to raise the bar for those coming after us. Having an impact in the AFCON and reaching the World Cup would be the biggest. We cannot think too far ahead but, for our generation, we do not want to be remembered as the 'nearly team'. We want to fulfil that dream of playing at the World Cup."

Traore, 31, brings considerable experience to a Mali team that, while youthful, boasts significant knowhow in top European leagues. "We have a lot of experience now," Fofana says. "I have strong faith in the squad that we will qualify. It will mean a lot to our country, careers and generation to make it to the World Cup."

Helming the team from the bench is 46-year-old former Valenciennes and Lens defender Eric Chelle, whose modest international career coincided with the last Mali golden generation in the mid-2000s. That brush with the vintage of Seydou Keita and Frederic Kanoute, fleeting though it was, equipped Chelle with an understanding and a gravitas that Traore believes distinguishes him from previous coaches.

"We must appreciate all our former coaches because they also built what we have," Traore says, by way of clarification. "But now we have a coach who played for the national team in the past and understands the mentality of the players as a Malian, former player and now the coach. He knows what we need and the players also respect him, so there is unity within the squad.

"We have no big players or small players, we all defend the colours of Mali. When I play, I go to war on the field with my brothers and family – that's how it is. We can make corrections because we all suffered the pain and agony together, because everyone in the team shares this spirit of wanting to play at the World Cup.

"I want to win with Mali, I want to fly with Mali and nobody will forget us if we manage to reach the World Cup."

That unity, born of shared suffering and desire, has only served to whet the appetite for this crop, and the sense of history and legacy is acute now more than ever.

Current generation... (left to right) Amadou Haidara, Hamari Traore and Ibrahima Kone

Next generation... Hamidou Makalou and Ibrahim Diarra in action for Mali at the 2023 U17 World Cup

TRENT 2.0

Former Liverpool right-back and Reds academy mentor Rob Jones discusses the evolution of Trent Alexander-Arnold

Words: Paul Hassall

"I'm just a normal lad from Liverpool whose dream has just come true."

Those unassuming words were spoken by Trent Alexander-Arnold in the immediate aftermath of Liverpool's 2019 Champions League triumph and were fittingly immortalised on a mural dedicated to the homegrown star in the streets close to Anfield.

Rumours earlier this season suggested that a similar picture had recently replaced an image of the departed, former captain, Jordan Henderson lifting the Premier League trophy inside the club's AXA Training Complex.

Whether you believe it or not, such a shift resonates with pictorial symbolism, illustrating the move away from Jurgen Klopp's great Liverpool side that ended a 30-year wait for a top-flight title towards the German's vision for a "Liverpool Reloaded."

Alexander-Arnold's evolution and ever-increasing influence on and off the pitch looks set to be a key feature of Klopp's Liverpool 2.0 with his new role as club vice-captain following on from his switch to a fluid right-back/midfield hybrid position.

For many of the staff at the club's academy, Alexander-Arnold's sensational rise towards legendary status did not come as a surprise and the expectation is that there is still much more to come.

A former Liverpool and England right-back, Rob Jones has been a mentor at the Reds' youth base for the past nine years and has watched Alexander-Arnold's development closely.

"I was more involved with Trent after he turned 16, but you obviously hear all the talk around the academy about this young lad coming through who is a bit special," Jones tells *World Soccer*.

"Back then he used to control the midfield so he's always had that in his locker. I remember an Under-18s match at Manchester United when he took on a long-distance free-kick few would consider, but he has such faith in his own ability. He curled it straight into the top corner and it sticks in my mind. I just thought: 'Wow, everyone here is right about him. This lad has got it.'"

Alexander-Arnold's path from youth-team midfielder to first-team right-back has been well-documented, but Jones' influence during the fledgling stages of that transformation is perhaps understated.

"Everyone knew what a prospect he was and it was felt that position would be the most likely pathway to the first ▶

ALEXANDER-ARNOLD
66

Mural...Alexander-Arnold's tribute in the streets of Liverpool

team at that time," says Jones, referring to discussions between leading academy figures at the time such as Alex Inglethorpe, Michael Beale and Neil Critchley.

"I think some people believe that if you are brilliant in midfield, you can just slip into a full-back position, but it's an art in itself.

"He was thrown in at the deep end in an Under-21 match against Manchester City at Anfield and he didn't do too well. I felt a bit sorry for him in that game, but we started working on him in training and he made rapid strides.

"Back then I could still actively engage in the training sessions and would work on various aspects of the position with him. I'd only look to help Trent if I felt he needed it. When a player is just flowing and doing most things right, I tend to leave them. There were some ups and downs at first, but it wasn't long until he got the first-team call."

In a strange quirk of fate, Alexander-Arnold would go on to make his full Premier League debut at Manchester United in January 2017, the very same venue where Jones made his Liverpool bow back in 1991. Just like Jones, it was a successful maiden start in the top flight and the West Derby-born star has not looked back since.

> "He curled it straight into the top corner and it sticks in my mind. I just thought 'Wow, everyone here is right about him. This lad has got it'"

As Jurgen Klopp began to mould his "Mentality Monsters", Alexander-Arnold established himself as the swashbuckling, right-sided juggernaut of the red machine that pushed Pep Guardiola's Manchester City to the limits. Come the summer of 2022, at the age of just 23, he had won pretty much all of the silverware club football has to offer.

But then came a stagnation, both for the team and in the individual form of the England international himself, during the 2022-23 campaign. Liverpool's ageing midfield legs were highlighted, exposed and exploited, with Alexander-Arnold's defensive capabilities continually questioned and over-analysed as space down his flank was capitalised upon by the opposition.

Baby faced... Alexander-Arnold

The fact England boss Gareth Southgate had reservations about him in the right-back berth had always bemused Klopp, but as Alexander-Arnold's assist count laboured during a difficult season, the Reds manager sat down with his backroom staff to try to find a solution that would re-energise the then 24-year-old and his creative talents to help boost his flagging side.

Assistant manager Pepijn Lijnders is largely credited with pushing to experiment with Alexander-Arnold in the hybrid role, telling the *Training Ground Guru* podcast that he was "willing to bet his salary on it working" and that playing "this boy, from the inside, will be a present."

Once again Trent was thrown in at the deep end in a Spring clash with title-chasing Arsenal that ended 2-2; a showdown that was the catalyst for a seven-match winning streak as Liverpool ended a disappointing season on a positive note with an 11-game unbeaten run.

Alexander-Arnold's influence in his new role was immediate with a haul of one goal and seven assists rubber-stamping a return to form and offering a tantalising glimpse into what a more central role could promise.

"Jurgen and his coaching staff deserve great credit for the analysis and implementation of the change," says Jones. "Something wasn't working so they looked to address it and got the reward.

"Trent's standards are so high that people inevitably commented last season, but he wasn't alone. The team were obviously in a difficult period.

"It is similar to when Steven Gerrard was there. The expectation is so vast, but in many ways that is a huge compliment in itself because everyone thinks so highly of Trent as a player and a person.

"I've never spoken to him about some of the spotlight pundits shine on his defending at times. I think the positives he brings far outweigh any supposed negatives and I'm always impressed by how he shuts it all out and responds to silence them. He's got his Liverpool family around him and I don't think he allows the noise from the outside to be a distraction."

The rejuvenation did not go unnoticed by Southgate either, with the England manager keen to explore the Liverpool star's creative talents further forward, despite a brief and forgettable 45-minute cameo in midfield against Andorra two years earlier. This time Trent responded with a Player of the Match performance away to Malta in Euro 2024 qualifying that he capped with a stunning 25-yard goal.

Greater tests would undoubtedly lie ahead but Alexander-Arnold's evolution and potential metamorphosis was taking shape for both club and country.

Dream come true...Trent lifts the Champions League trophy

Competing...Erling Haaland challenges Trent for possession

Liverpool's summer midfield rebuild brought with it the air of change that was needed and Alexander-Arnold arrived for pre-season training with a new look. Gone were the dreadlocks and in its place was a buzz cut with the 25-year-old stating: "The hair speaks for itself. Fresh start, new season, new me; we're back and we're better."

Klopp then bestowed the honour of club vice-captain on his protégé, leading to him skippering his boyhood club for the first time in the Premier League in a 3-0 victory at home to Aston Villa in September.

"He's matured and it has come at the right time. It's a very clever appointment," says Jones. "I don't think Jurgen would have selected him if he wasn't ready and I think we are already seeing signs of that growing stature and presence on the pitch this season.

"He was quite shy as a kid but always good around the academy changing room. When he got on that pitch, he was like a captain. He led by example and the other lads looked up to him, so you can see similar parallels with this Liverpool.

"He's an England international, a local lad who is a serial winner and someone who has been around that first-team changing room for a number of years."

A brief spell on the sidelines with a hamstring issue and an unfortunate run of games where Liverpool had players sent off meant Alexander-Arnold's increasing influence as part of the new-look midfield pivot when in possession was hard to gauge initially, but that all changed in what many felt would be the acid test for Klopp's Liverpool Reloaded when they visited champions Manchester City in late November.

> "When you have unbelievable, world-class ability like Trent, you just have to get him influencing and dictating as much as possible"

The Reds came away with a 1-1 draw that not only gave tangible credence to suggestions of a title tilt but was also where Alexander-Arnold 2.0 delivered a statement of the "new me" on the biggest stage in spectacular fashion.

"You can see as soon as he steps into that midfield role, it's so easy and natural for him. He's grown up there. He's confident and he's like a duck to water. His passing ability is amazing and his running is so strong," says Jones.

"That equaliser at City was the perfect example of how the team can reap rewards from moving him into the middle.

"He followed that with the winner against Fulham a week later. Both of those late goals came when the team really needed someone to step up."

Those *Roy of the Rovers* type exploits have been described as Steven Gerrard-esque from fans and pundits alike, while Alexander-Arnold's reinvention of the right-back role has led another former England full-back, Gary Neville, to claim he has got "the material to be the very best right-back of all time."

It again poses the conundrum: is this a continued evolution with Alexander-Arnold further contemporising the right-back position in Liverpool Reloaded? Or are we witnessing another stage of a complete midfield metamorphosis that will catapult in 2024 and see him fully shoulder the responsibility as the Scouse heartbeat

Late show... Alexander-Arnold celebrates the late winner against Fulham

of this exciting, new group of Reds?

"He would be a major asset as an out-and-out midfielder but who would do as good a job as him at right-back for Liverpool?" asks Jones. "Going forward he is the best there is, so you would need to sign a top-class right-back to compensate for losing him there.

"It's one Jurgen and the club will no doubt be discussing but it's not such an easy answer which is possibly why the hybrid role suits Liverpool at present.

"When you have unbelievable, world-class ability like Trent, you just have to get him influencing and dictating as much as possible.

"He's the local lad and there are Gerrard-style vibes about him at times, which is obviously very exciting for everyone, and in the years to come the natural progression will be for him to follow in those homegrown footsteps and become captain.

"I think Jurgen said it best when he was talking about 'Liverpool Reloaded'. It's a new chance for everybody and everybody has to step up. He wants them to take responsibility and be the best version of themselves.

"I think you can see Trent is translating that message to the pitch as well as anyone. This 'new' Trent could well be the main inspiration and symbol of this latest Liverpool team for years to come."

25-yard stunner ...scoring against Malta for England

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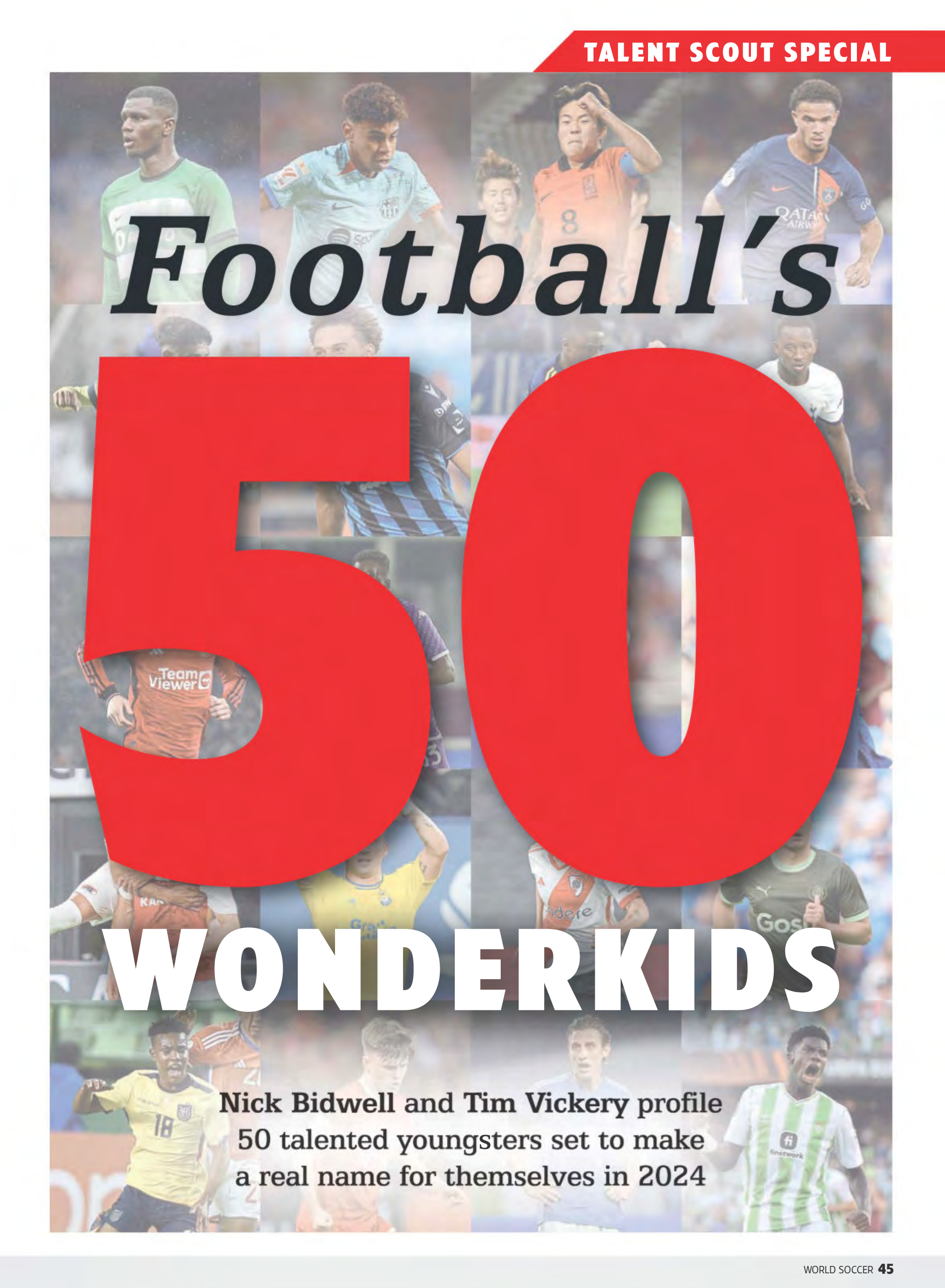


Football's 50 WONDERKIDS

Nick Bidwell and Tim Vickery profile 50 talented youngsters set to make a real name for themselves in 2024

Ousmane DIOMANDE

Sporting (Por)
Age: 20
Centre-back

The hefty €80 million release clause that Lisbon big guns Sporting have slapped on the highly-rated Ivorian centre-back does not appear to be dampening the interest of a host of leading Premier League teams. Arsenal, Newcastle, Manchester City and Chelsea are all thought to be very keen on the man-mountain defender and will be heartened by rumours that he has a soft spot for English football.

Diomande, under contract to Sporting until 2027, has enjoyed a meteoric rise in recent times. Just four years ago, he was performing in the Ivorian third division with Olympic Sport Abobo; in the 2021-22 season he was still a member of the Midtjylland youth team in Denmark, and he spent part of the 2022-23 campaign on loan at Mafra (Midtjylland's sister club) in the Portuguese second tier. His big break came early in 2023 when Sporting shelled out €7.5m for him. Taking on the challenge with his customary composure, he became a first-team starter within a couple of weeks.

Arguably Sporting's most effective and consistent performer as they seek to lead the dance in the current Portuguese title race, Diomande is the epitome of the modern day centre-back: an amalgam of power, speed and two-footed technique. Not only is he a beast physically, an intense competitor, who sees every duel as one he must win – "It gives me a thrill to make a good tackle," he says – he has more than enough speed to cope with any quicksilver frontrunner, reads the game well, can pass accurately and brings the ball out of defence with brio.

"I am the sort of player who likes to have the ball at his feet," Diomande told Sporting's magazine. "When I'm on the ball, I try to come up with the right solutions and to successfully do that, I aim to always be calm. I'm capable of producing good passes and would like to think I anticipate things well."

Sporting coach Ruben Amorim is convinced that the club pulled off a real coup in jumping the queue to secure Diomande's services in January 2023. "He has so much talent and what most people don't know is that a high quantity of top clubs were chasing him," revealed Amorim shortly after his unveiling. "We're more and more confident that we've completed an excellent signing. He's strong both with and without the ball. I wouldn't choose anyone else."

Mafra president Jose Cristo says he never had any doubt that Diomande was en route to the top, labelling him: "a player, who, in my opinion, could fit in any team in the world."

Johan BAKAYOKO

PSV (Ned)
Age: 20
Winger

The Belgium wide-man is one of the most effervescent and silky attacking young players in Europe today – little wonder the likes of Napoli, Paris Saint-Germain, Tottenham Hotspur and Liverpool are watching him closely. The PSV academy graduate is revelling in the responsibility of his first season as a starter at the Philips Stadion.

Carlos BALEBA

Brighton (Eng)
Age: 19
Defensive midfielder

The Cameroon ace, acquired last summer from Lille in a deal worth around €27m, seems to be worth every penny, justifying the assertion of Brighton boss Roberto De Zerbi that Baleba represented the "future of the club." Outstanding technique, vision and tactical awareness.

Valentin BARCO

Boca Juniors (Arg)
Age: 19
Left-back/left-winger

Little red-headed figure who made a big impact in the second half of 2023. Can play as an attacking left-back, but best utilised as a winger where he is free to play from the flank, running at defenders, linking with the strikers and carrying a threat with his left-footed shots and set-pieces.

Bradley BARCOLA

Paris Saint-Germain (Fra)
Age: 21
Forward
After coming good for Lyon in the second half of last season, the France Under-21 tyro now faces the challenge of living up to the €45m fee Ligue 1 champions PSG splashed out for him last summer. He very much has the tools, especially in his ability to take on and beat defenders at will, and has made a promising start at the Parc des Princes.

Jeanuel BELOCIAN

Rennes (Fra)
Age: 18
Centre-back
Born in Guadeloupe, the French archipelago in the Caribbean, Belocian is enjoying a breakout season in Ligue 1, looking equally resourceful in central defence or at left-back. Also strong as a defensive midfielder, he was part of France U17s' Euros-winning side of 2022.

Lucas BERGVALL

Djurgardens (Swe)
Age: 17
Midfielder
Sensational Swedish prospect who can do it all: compete and tackle, dribble with considerable menace, serve as a distribution fulcrum and stealthily creep into goalscoring positions. Djurgardens have admitted that Barcelona have already been in touch about the teenage starlet.

Jorrel HATO

Ajax (Ned)
Age: 17
Centre-back
The teenage prodigy expressed what appeared to be genuine shock on hearing that he had been called up to the full Dutch squad for the Euro 2024 qualifiers against Republic of Ireland and Gibraltar in November. Few others in the Netherlands would have been as baffled. On the basis of his exceptional performances for the Amsterdammers this season, the reward of a first cap – granted in a 45-minute substitute run-out in the 6-0 win over Gibraltar – was more than merited.

In an Ajax side that has struggled for much of this term, young Hato has had a heavy workload. But in a roundabout way, operating in such a malfunctioning side has allowed him the opportunity to shine, constantly catching the eye with his versatility – often filling in at left-back – athleticism, calm head in pressure situations, quick reactions and extraordinary ability to block goal-bound shots, often with his telescopic-like legs. Superb on the ball and blessed with great football intelligence, the kid is an absolute natural. A great mix of style, steel and assuredness.

Handing him the armband in December's Europa League win over AEK Athens – making him the youngest-ever starting Ajax captain in a European match – shows how highly Ajax rate him.

Incredible how Hato seems to take everything in his stride, how easily he has made the transition from the Ajax youth team and reserves to the upper echelons of the pro ranks. He only made his Eredivisie debut in February of last year, coming off the bench in a 5-0 victory over Cambuur to become the third-youngest player to ever appear for Ajax in the domestic top flight (behind Ryan Gravenberch and Clarence Seedorf).

Of Curacaoan and Cape Verdean descent, Hato was born and grew up in south Rotterdam. He would have dearly loved to join the academy at Feyenoord, the top club in the city and the team he and his father supported. However, he was not considered good enough and instead linked up with Sparta Rotterdam at the age of nine. Three years later, in 2018, his star had risen sufficiently for Ajax to recruit him.

Dolf Roks, the former director of Sparta's academy who now has a youth development role at Ajax, says Hato always was an outstanding talent. "He was the best in his class. Physically, he was ahead of everybody else and was far more skilful technically too. He also had a very good mindset. He came from a good family, who did a great job of guiding him. In training, he always wanted to improve." Mission accomplished.

Sebastian BOSELLI

River Plate (Arg)
Age: 20
Centre-back
Cool centre-back with excellent reading of the game, positional sense and timing in the tackle. The outstanding figure in Uruguay's Under-20 World Cup win last year with a series of classy displays. Afterwards left Defensor Sporting for River Plate, where scarce early chances came at right-back. Much is expected in 2024.

Roma (Ita)
Age: 21
Midfielder
As we all know, Roma coach Jose Mourinho has no time for players who do not sweat blood for the cause, and Bove can always be counted upon on this score. Either as a number ten or deeper, the youngster brings a guarantee of hunger, commitment and dynamism. Nothing flashy, just substance.

Edoardo BOVE

Claudio ECHEVERRI

River Plate (Arg)
Age: 18
Attacking midfielder
Bronze boot winner at the recent U17 World Cup and gently being introduced to senior club action, where he has immediately looked at home. Marvellously fluid runner with the ball, full of changes of direction and rhythm. Will stay at River before joining Manchester City for £21.7m in December 2024.

Real Betis (Spa)
Age 18
Winger
The sensational form of the Spain U21 winger has certainly not gone unnoticed beyond the frontiers of Andalusia. No fewer than four English clubs (Aston Villa, Manchester United, Liverpool and Brentford) are reported to be tracking the pacy and skilful La Liga rookie, as well as leading sides in Portugal.

Assane DIAO

Ibrahim DIARRA

Academie Africa Foot (Mli)
Age: 17
Attacking midfielder
Mali's bronze medal at the U17 World Cup in December was based to a large extent on the contribution of their captain and right-sided midfielder, who got five goals and four assists. A strong dribbler, he is due to join Barcelona when he turns 18 this year.

Ben DOAK

Liverpool (Eng)
Age: 18
Winger
The modern game is all about pace, and the Scottish winger absolutely fits this particular bill. Small in stature but remarkably combative and robust, the ex-Celtic academy player – who signed for Liverpool in 2022 for a compensation fee of around £600,000 – represents everything opposing full-backs hate. An all-day threat.

Duncan McGUIRE

Orlando City (USA)
Age: 22
Striker

Anyone wondering how Orlando City's rookie front man has gone from Major League Soccer anonymity to headliner in the blink of an eye only needs to peruse one short video clip of the 22-year-old firing home a wonderful goal in a 2-0 win over Toronto FC in October. In what could be a career-defining strike, McGuire collected a goal-kick from team-mate Mason Stajduhar, artfully flicked the ball over veteran Toronto midfielder Michael Bradley and barrelled forward in the right-hand channel before smashing a ferocious cross-shot into the top corner. A contender for Goal of the Season.

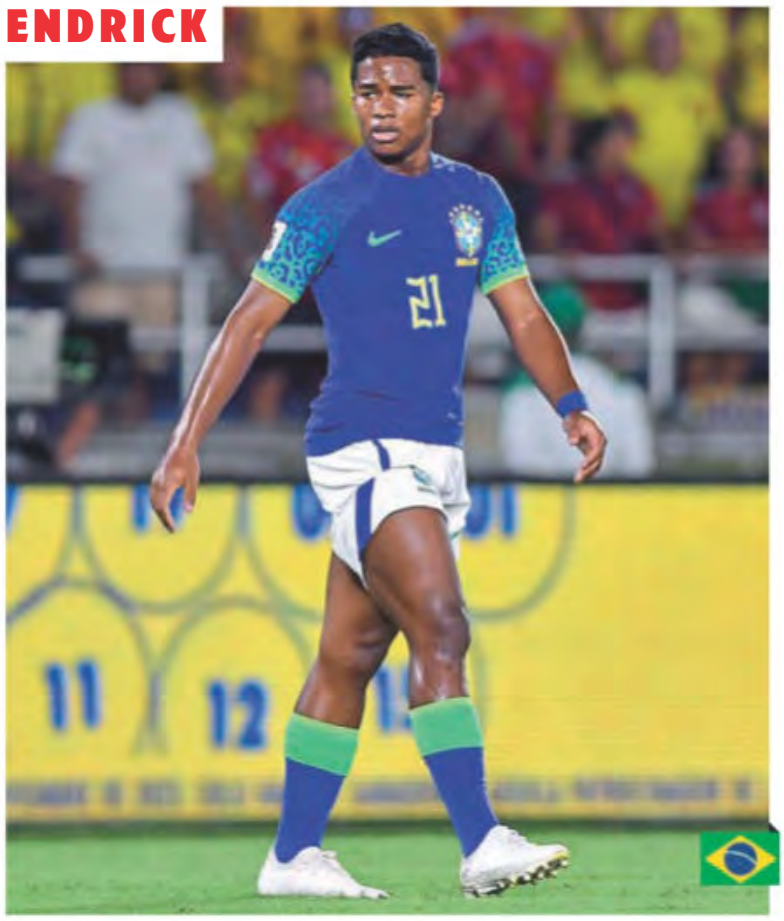
Picked sixth overall in the 2023 MLS SuperDraft after scoring regularly for Creighton University in his hometown of Omaha, Nebraska, McGuire spent the first four months of the 2023 MLS season on the bench. But even then he proved decisive, netting no fewer than five times as a supersub. By June, he had earned his wings as the team's main striker, justifying the choice of coach Oscar Pareja with 13 goals in all as Orlando progressed to the play-offs, where they lost to eventual champions Columbus Crew in the Eastern Conference semi-finals. Rarely do draft picks make such an immediate impact in the goalscoring stakes. McGuire, though, did so with aplomb.

He promptly was rewarded for his exploits with a call-up to the USA Olympic squad and now seems to have a choice to make. Does he stay in Orlando for another campaign, or cross the Atlantic to Europe, where Italian, Belgian and German clubs are reportedly on his trail?

He would be well suited to the cut and thrust of the English game. Besides his natural knack for goalscoring, he plays with physicality, a will-to-win and full-on energy. The phrase "lost cause" simply does not register with him, he will scrap and fight for every ball and, with his big build, he most definitely unsettles opposing defenders.

He is totally grounded too, probably as a result of the difficulties he once experienced in making the grade at Creighton. In his sophomore year there, he only managed one goal in 19 games. Then somehow, someway, he pressed the reset button, scoring 23 goals in 24 appearances in his senior year and winning the Hermann Trophy, the MVP prize for college players.

ENDRICK



Palmeiras (Bra)
Age: 17
Forward

The decisive last few weeks of the 2023 Brazilian league campaign gave conclusive proof that the hype is most definitely justified. Stocky left-footed figure with bags of skill, pace and audacity, understanding of space, and mental toughness. Looks like a special talent. Off to Real Madrid in the middle of the year when he turns 18.

Carlos FORBS

Ajax (Ned)
Age: 19
Winger

Dynamic, pacy Portuguese winger who was born to slalom around defenders. A prolific assist-maker and goalscorer with Manchester City's Under-21s last season, Forbs was voted Premier League 2 Player of the Year before moving to Ajax on a five-year contract last summer for a reported £17.3m. City made sure to insert a buy-back option.

Alejandro GARNACHO

Manchester United (Eng)
Age: 19
Winger
If Garnacho continues his development then the sky is the limit. Starting far more often for the Red Devils this season – already registering over double the number of starts he accumulated in 2022-23 – the flamboyant South American is a really special talent, as proven by his breathtaking overhead kick goal against Everton at Goodison Park in November.

Michael KAYODE

Fiorentina (Ita)
Age: 19
Right-back
It made perfect sense when Italy boss Luciano Spalletti recently told the press he would be keeping a close eye on the Fiorentina full-back. The match-winner in Italy U19s' victory over Portugal in the final of last year's Euros, Kayode is a marvellous attacking right-back of vim and panache.

Sael KUMBEDI

Lyon (Fra)
Age: 18
Right-back
Le Havre have a long tradition of developing top talent from the Greater Paris region, and this right-back is the next off the conveyor belt. Joined OL in 2022, shortly after netting a brace in France's win over the Netherlands in the final of the U17 European Championship.

Max MOERSTEDT

Hoffenheim (Ger)
Age: 18
Striker
While most of the media plaudits in the wake of Germany's recent triumph at the 2023 Under-17 World Cup in Indonesia were directed at attacking midfielder Noah Darvich, forward Paris Brunner and penalty shootout hero goalkeeper Konstantin Heide, the outstanding contribution of the young Hoffenheim centre-forward went strangely ignored by many. He scored in both the round of 16 versus the United States and semi-final against Argentina, netted twice in the group phase (versus Mexico and New Zealand), dispatched his penalty-kick in the shootout victory over France in the final, and generally did a fine job of leading the line.

Big-club scouts in Europe are certainly not immune to the charms of the lanky teenager. Despite, at the time of writing, never having played for Hoffenheim's first team – he currently scores for the club's Under-19s for fun – a number of many leading Premier League teams (Manchester United, Chelsea and Brighton) plus Italian heavyweights Juventus and Atalanta are reported to be seriously sizing him up.

Since all-time record goalscorer Miroslav Klose and Mario Gomez departed the *Nationalmannschaft* stage in 2014 and 2018 respectively, the Germany national team has searched in vain for a classic central striker and, according to those in the know, young Moerstedt might just be the answer to their prayers.

He is strong in the air, has an obvious nose for goal, is always in the right place at the right time, has plenty of physical presence and is quite the sprinter, capable of running 30 metres in a more than decent 3.95 seconds. Not surprisingly for someone who used to play in midfield, he is very creative too, excellent in his link-up play.

"Max is the complete striker," says Hoffenheim Under-19 coach Tobias Nubbemeyer. "He's very intelligent in his movement, presses well and is robust and tough and will run all day. His instincts in the box are first class. He's very strong in his finishing."

Although the Blues are steadfast in their determination not to rush his development, the Bundesliga outfit's decision to include Moerstedt in their senior squad for a winter break training camp says it all.

On Bayern Munich's books as a 15-year-old, he was forced out by the COVID outbreak, heading back to his native south-west to join Hoffenheim.

Alberto MOLEIRO

Las Palmas (Spa)
Age: 20
Attacking midfielder

Barcelona have a fondness for Canary Island football talent. Some four-and-a-half years after striking a deal with Las Palmas for the prodigiously creative Pedri, Camp Nou scouts now have their beady eyes trained on the 20-year-old Moleiro, another wonderfully-gifted player from the exact same source.

A ball-playing virtuoso comfortable on either flank or as a number ten, the Spain Under-21 international is very much a one-man attacking show, so hard to pin down because of his technical mastery, quickness, low centre of gravity, ability to improvise and flair for skipping through heavy traffic. A quick thinker, he's unselfish too, especially in his astute lay-offs in and around the box, and is a real threat when weaving a forward path from deep.

"He does everything at speed with the ball apparently tied to his feet and his head up," says Pepe Mel, the coach who gave Moleiro his first-team debut for Las Palmas in a second tier fixture against Real Valladolid in August 2021.

It's common practice in Spain these days to mention Moleiro and Pedri in the same breath, to describe them as two peas in a pod. The truth, as Pepe Mel points out, is somewhat different.

"The pair have their own distinct qualities. Pedri is a player for the collective, for keeping the ball and dictating the rhythm. When Pedri has the ball, it's about substance and continuity. On the other hand, Alberto Moleiro is more of a game-changing type. He's one to make the final pass or take on and beat an opponent. He's great in one-on-ones. Going forward, his ball control cuts out defenders."

This season, his first as a La Liga pro, started on the wrong foot for Moleiro. In August, he broke down with a hamstring injury and while newly-promoted Las Palmas got to grips with their first taste of top-flight action in five years, the youngster had to make do with the rehabilitation circuit. Only in late October did he return to playing, showcasing his skills with a rare verve and hunger.

Barcelona have been fans of his for quite some time. Indeed, he came very close to signing for them in the summer of 2022. The *Blaugrana* thought that a bid of €25m (a €10m down-payment plus €15m in add-ons) would be enough to seal the deal, but Las Palmas president Miguel Angel Ramirez would not budge, insisting that any buyer would have to pay the relevant release clause of €30m. Since then, the buy-out clause has doubled to €60m.

Hugo LARSSON

Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger)
Age: 19
Midfielder

The Sweden midfielder, who joined Eintracht from Malmo in a €9m deal last summer, has impressed in the Bundesliga straightaway with his two-way qualities, his endurance, smart decision-making and incisiveness. Man of the Match in Eintracht's recent 5-1 thumping of Bayern Munich, he already has four caps for Sweden.

Rico LEWIS

Manchester City (Eng)
Age: 19
Full-back/Midfielder

Pep Guardiola says he could not be happier with the progress of the City academy graduate – high praise indeed from the perfectionist Catalan manager. So remarkably consistent and effortlessly versatile, Lewis is able to play in a variety of positions: full-back, holding midfielder and number eight.

Jovan MIJATOVIC

Red Star Belgrade (Srb)
Age: 18
Striker

It's no flight of fancy to assert that the Serbia U19 striker has what it takes to be a world-beater. Currently in his rookie season in the Red Star first team, he has been piling up the goals and provide a constant attacking spark. Physical, mobile and slick in combinations around the penalty box.

Kendry PAEZ

Independiente del Valle (Ecu)
Age: 16
Attacking midfielder

Astonishingly, Ecuador now has a claim to be at least level with Argentina as the country that is offering the best resistance for Brazil's domination of club football in South America. In part this, and the rise of the national team, has something to do with the extraordinary youth development work that is taking place at Independiente del Valle, a little club from the outskirts of Quito.

Their most valuable export so far is midfielder Moises Caicedo. From mid-2025, a potentially even bigger talent from the club will be lining up with Caicedo at Chelsea. They are already combining to good effect in World Cup qualification. And Kendry Paez is only 16.

In 2023 the hype was justified, and then some. The left-footed Paez scored on his club debut in February. He looked good in the South American Under-17 Championships, and even better soon afterwards in the Under-20 World Cup. It was striking how Paez had become the go-to man, the one his older team-mates looked to for inspiration. The outcome? Instant promotion to the senior side, with Paez starting the last five World Cup qualifiers. He has never been on the losing side and he has helped his team accumulate some valuable points.

On debut at home to Uruguay he worked a cute free-kick routine with Caicedo and squared for centre-back Felix Torres to score the winner. Away to Bolivia, he raced in behind the defence to place a cool shot past the keeper and give his team the lead. At home to Chile he was fundamental to the only goal of the game, running at the defence and hitting a fierce shot that the goalkeeper parried for Angel Mena to follow up.

Normally Ecuador line up with Paez on the right of an attacking trio, although with freedom to roam and the capacity to drop deep and orchestrate, using the range of his imagination and the strength and subtlety of his left foot. But against Chile, he played as a number ten behind the striker, and enjoyed the responsibility and extra possibilities to find space.

It is similar to the role that, by the end of the year, he was filling with his club. In the second leg of the domestic final against LDU he used that space to run and score with a superb shot. It was a goal worthy of winning the title, but a goalkeeping error at the other end meant that it went to a shootout, by which time Paez had been subbed. Not surprisingly, he is struggling to last the 90 minutes, but he is filling out, and there is still a year and a half to go before he makes the move across the Atlantic.

For the next 18 months, then, South America has the privilege of observing his rapid, continued development.

Shunsuke MITO

Sparta Rotterdam (Ned)
Age: 21
Midfielder

Omnipresent little midfielder who makes his presence felt with his high-octane style, heads-up probing and ability to knit the play together. He deservedly topped the poll as the J. League's Best Young Player in 2023 following his breakout season at Albirex Niigata, and very much looks ready for the next step in his career after joining Sparta Rotterdam in January.

Gabriel MOSCARDO

Corinthians (Bra)
Age: 18
Defensive midfielder

Tall, imperious figure who did well in difficult circumstances when introduced in the second half of 2023 with his club threatened by relegation. Screens the defence, passes well and can drive the team forward, coming across as a young Brazilian Declan Rice. Set to join PSG.

Joao NEVES

Benfica (Por)
Age: 19
Midfielder

After breaking into the Benfica starting XI in the final few weeks of last season, Neves has continued onwards and upwards this campaign, emerging as real force for the Eagles and winning his first senior caps for Portugal. A player of high energy, precision passing and controlled aggression.

Antonio NUSA

Club Brugge (Bel)
Age: 18
Forward

To categorise Nusa as red-hot property fails to do him justice. Two-and-a-half years since leaving Stabaek in his native land for Club Brugge, the human fireworks display – who can play anywhere across the front line – finds himself actively pursued by big clubs all over Europe. Chelsea had a £23m bid rejected for him on the final day of the summer window.

Edier OCAMPO

Atletico Nacional (Col)
Age: 20
Right-back

Stocky, strong and fast right-back who can work the touchline and also cover his centre-backs. Did well at Under-20 level in 2023 and had a sound year consolidating his club career. In the mould of former Atletico Nacional and Colombia right-back Juan Camilo Zuniga.

Yael PADILLA

Guadalajara (Mex)
Age: 18
Winger

No other Mexican rookie made a bigger impact in the 2023-24 Apertura season than the little right-winger, an irrepressible bundle of tricks and elusiveness. Boasting adhesive ball control at speed, he made his Liga MX bow v Leon in July, scoring just seven minutes after coming off the bench.

Cole PALMER

Chelsea (Eng)
Age: 21
Attacking midfielder

Did Manchester City make a mistake in selling the highly-gifted playmaker to Chelsea last summer? The 21-year-old Mancunian's outstanding form since arriving at Stamford Bridge suggests that the Premier League champions may have been too hasty.

No doubt City would flatly deny the charge, arguing that they were already over-stocked in the final-third department and that £42.5m for a player with only a handful of first-team appearances to his name represents sound business. Nor did City force him out; it was Palmer's decision to move on. Understandably he wanted to play more, frustrated by just three Premier League starts in three seasons under City manager Pep Guardiola. Despite spending 13 years rising through the ranks at City, Palmer, a boyhood Manchester United fan, held little attachment to City.

Another one-time City boy wonder, Phil Foden had to endure a similarly long and arduous process before finally establishing himself in Pep Guardiola's side. Palmer – who began this season by netting for City in both the Community Shield and European Super Cup – simply was not prepared to be as patient.

City's loss is very much Chelsea's gain. Excellent as an advanced playmaker or right-sided winger, the willowy Palmer plays with a natural elegance, has a wand of a left foot and is enormously creative, great at picking out runners with a one-touch pass, elusive on the half-turn and invariably taking up intelligent positions. And when he gets in and around the penalty area, he has a real eye for goal too.

He brims over with self-confidence and it's not by accident that he swiftly assumed the role of Chelsea penalty taker. By early December, he had calmly tucked away four spot-kicks, including a stoppage-time equaliser in a pulsating 4-4 draw with his old club Manchester City at Stamford Bridge in November. Afterwards he told *Sky Sports*: I won't say I work on penalties, because I don't. I just trust my ability."

The following day, he deservedly received his first call-up to the full England squad, earning his first cap as a second-half substitute in a 2-0 win over Malta in a Euro 2024 qualifier at Wembley. This came just months after playing a crucial role in the Young Lions' triumph at the Under-21 European Championship in Georgia, where he scored in the semi-final against Israel before seeing his free-kick deflect off Liverpool midfielder Curtis Jones for the winner in the final against Spain.

Aleksandar PAVLOVIC

Bayern Munich (Ger)
Age: 19
Defensive midfielder
Despite the Serbian name, the supremely resourceful holding midfielder is one of the rare Munich natives in the Bayern senior squad. A hard-running, technically accomplished and intelligent player, the Germany U20 international has been with the Bavarians since the age of seven. Started his first league game in November – a 4-2 win over Heidenheim.

Guillaume RESTES

Toulouse (Fra)
Age: 18
Goalkeeper
Pencilled in to be Toulouse's back-up goalkeeper this term, the 18-year-old was so impressive in pre-season that he managed to turn the tables on the supposed first-choice, Norwegian Kjetil Haug, who then had to leave on loan for first-team action. Restes has not looked back since and within a month was called up by France U21 boss Thierry Henry.

Pape Matar SARR

Tottenham Hotspur (Eng)
Age: 21
Midfielder
Tottenham supporters can only be relieved that rumours in the off-season of a Marseille swoop for the all-action Senegalese midfielder proved to be made of dust. The 21-year-old Sarr, who joined Spurs from French outfit Metz in the summer of 2022, found himself marginalised in his first season in North London, used so sparingly by then-coach Antonio Conte that he totalled just two starts in the English top flight. Inevitably, speculation began to mount in France – where he still has many admirers – that he would be returning to Ligue 1. But how his life has changed since new Tottenham manager Ange Postecoglou arrived in the summer. The Australian boss immediately saw something he liked in the busy, versatile West African and now Sarr is one of the foundation stones of a much-improved side.

Postecoglou is absolutely correct when he says that Sarr is effectively four players in one: simultaneously a defensive midfielder of substantial grit, commitment and awareness of danger; an energetic and incisive box-to-box man; a classy number ten or as a shuttling full-back/wing-back. Forming an exceptional midfield triangle in the early months of the season alongside controlling-destroying hybrid Yves Bissouma and playmaker James Maddison – before injury to the latter and Africa Cup of Nations exploits by the former two broke up the partnership – young Sarr has been nothing less than a revelation, so good that he often seems to be running the show.

While Sarr – who helped Senegal win the 2021 AFCON title – does have something of the untamed colt about him, always embroiled in the heart of the battle and on occasion, a little precipitous in his decision-making, the positives of his play far outweigh the deficiencies. He carries the workload of two or three players, covers, harries and presses as through his life depended on it, and is very adept at attacking open spaces. In short, he is a perfect fit for the fast-paced play Postecoglou espouses.

They clearly know what they are doing at Generation Foot, the Senegalese academy that Metz set up in 2000 to nurture African talent. Sarr is just one of many exceptional pros to have emerged from the school, a roll-call of brilliance that includes ex-Freiburg and Newcastle United striker Papiss Cisse, former West Ham United front man Diafra Sakho, Marseille winger Ismaila Sarr (no relation) and the incomparable Sadio Mane. Generation Foot's senior team – whose average age is 18 – competes with distinction in the Senegalese Premier League and it speaks volumes of Sarr's quality that he started his career in the domestic top flight at the tender age of 15.

Luciano RODRIGUEZ

Liverpool (Uru)
Age: 20
Forward
Rodriguez was the star of the South American Under-20 Championship at the start of 2023. His World Cup at the same level was marred by an unjust sending-off and suspension, but he returned to score the title-winning goal in the final against Italy. Strong, good in open and reduced spaces, two-footed and able to operate across the attacking line.

Marciano SANCA

Almeria (Spa)
Age: 19
Forward
This season, his first in Almeria's first team, Sanca has only made a handful of cameo appearances, but he already has observers purring about his will-to-win, impudence, eye for goal and ability to operate anywhere along the front line. Already a full senior international for Guinea-Bissau.

LEE Seung-Won

Gangwon FC (Kor)
Age: 20
Midfielder
Only featuring for Gangwon's B team in the fourth tier of South Korean football was not problematic for Lee, as he starred for his country at the 2023 U20 World Cup. Industrious and thoughtful, his three goals and four assists set the tone as the Taegeuk Warriors reached the semis.

Pablo TORRE

Girona (Spa)
Age: 20
Attacking midfielder
Spanish sports daily *AS* recently described the attacking midfielder as a "treasure" after watching him produce a game-changing performance for Spain's U21s with his mobility, vision and quick feet. Girona would no doubt agree, only too happy to have him on loan from Barcelona this season.

Samuele VIGNATO

Monza (Ita)
Age: 19
Attacking midfielder
Italy probably would not have captured the Euros U19 crown last summer without his eye-catching work. A devastating dribbler, Vignato can play on either flank, as central playmaker or a second striker. Of Brazilian heritage via his mother, he recently celebrated his Serie A debut.

Ruben VAN BOMMEL

AZ (Ned)
Age: 19
Winger
In contrast to his father Mark – a crunching, no-nonsense defensive midfielder – young Ruben is infinitely more creative, a quick, bright and direct winger with a penchant for scoring goals. After featuring prominently in the second tier for MVV Maastricht, the Under-20 Dutch international joined AZ last summer and has done well in limited minutes.

Vitor ROQUE

Barcelona (Spa)
Age: 18
Striker
Barrel-chested striker with skill, mobility and physicality who has just completed a move to the Camp Nou from Athletico Paranaense. A great hope in a country with a preponderance of strikers in wide spaces and a dearth of genuine centre-forwards. Has already played in a Libertadores final and for the Brazil senior side. Has a €500m buy-out clause.

Luka VUSKOVIC

Hajduk Split (Cro)
Age: 16
Centre-back
A prodigy by any definition, the teenager made his senior Hajduk debut in early 2023, appearing in a league clash against Dinamo Zagreb just two days after his 16th birthday. Skippered Hajduk's U19s to the final of the 2022-23 UEFA Youth League. Will join Tottenham in 2025.

Lamine YAMAL

Barcelona (Spa)
Age: 16
Winger
Good enough to make his senior Barca debut last spring aged just 15 years, nine months and 16 days, the bravura dribbler is the youngest-ever first-teamer at the Camp Nou. Earlier this season, he celebrated his full international debut with a goal in a Euro 2024 qualifier against Georgia.

Arthur VERMEEREN

Antwerp (Bel)
Age: 18
Midfielder
Of all the items on their agenda, the management at Royal Antwerp have one priority at the moment: how to best protect their interests with regards to this brilliant midfield starlet.

Vermeeren, a key figure in Antwerp's surprise Belgian title win last season, is currently one of the most coveted youngsters on the European scene, with a swathe of clubs reportedly on the verge of putting offers on the table. Antwerp face a stick or twist dilemma: sell in the summer, or play for time, seeking to retain the baby-faced engine room all-rounder for as long as possible.

Antwerp coach Mark van Bommel concedes that it will be extremely difficult to keep the teen sensation under lock and key, but hopes that patience will be the order of the day. The former PSV, Bayern Munich and Barcelona midfielder believes that Vermeeren should follow the example of Jude Bellingham, who used a three-year top-level platform at Dortmund to later grasp greatness with Real Madrid.

"If elite European clubs are interested in someone, it becomes hard to hang onto them," Van Bommel told the *Gazet van Antwerpen*. "My feeling is that he can still take forward steps here while waiting for that big club to come along. With us, he can continue adapting to an increasingly higher level. The same thing happened with Bellingham. We just hope to keep him for a little longer."

Van Bommel is correct. As good as Vermeeren is in many different aspects of the craft of the midfielder – range of pass, ball-winning, work-rate, vision and football IQ – he has only been an Antwerp first-teamer since late 2022. A hasty departure from the Antwerp ground might not be to his advantage. One only has to look at the example of another hot Belgian prospect, Charles De Ketelaere who, after swapping Club Brugge for Milan in a €35m deal in 2022, found the expectations too hot to handle at the San Siro.

That said, Vermeeren is a remarkably level-headed character. Despite all the hoopla surrounding his emergence as the next big thing in Belgium, he has not allowed the hype to blow him off course. Over the past year, he has maintained high standards and at times seems to have carried Antwerp on his young shoulders; see his five-star performance in the recent Champions League victory over Barcelona.

The key question is where to best utilise his talents – as a controlling midfielder – the position he occupies at Antwerp – or in the box-to-box role that he performed on his full debut for Belgium in November, a 1-0 friendly victory over Serbia?

Warren ZAIRE-EMERY

Paris Saint-Germain (Fra)
Age: 17
Midfielder

At a time when the 17-year-old Paris Saint-Germain midfielder is performing out of his skin, the perennial French champions might just be tempted to rethink the nuts and bolts of their team-building philosophy.

Ever since Qatar Sports Investment took over at PSG back in 2000, the powers-that-be there have largely shown indifference to the many talented graduates of their ever-productive academy. But with Zaire-Emery spectacularly smashing through the glass ceiling of late, other homegrown youngsters could well enjoy more game time at the Parc des Princes.

On PSG's books since the age of nine, Zaire-Emery has always competed in the prodigy park. He was starring for their Under-19s when only 15, trained with the first team before his 16th birthday and, after coming on as a substitute in a Ligue 1 fixture against Clermont in August 2022, became the club's youngest senior player (16 years and 151 days). Last term, he appeared in 31 senior games for the Parisians, with the vast majority from the bench. So impressive was he that many PSG fans vociferously demanded that then-coach Christophe Galtier start him more often.

Under new coach Luis Enrique, this season the teenage ace has graduated to the rank of automatic starter and, as an added bonus, he has also broken into the senior France side, marking his international debut with a goal in the 14-0 rout of Gibraltar in November. The son of a Parisian father and mother from the Caribbean island of Martinique, he is *Les Bleus'* youngest international since 1914.

If truth be known, Zaire-Emery could and should have started more games last season. Galtier admitted as much in an interview with *L'Equipe* in November. "Warren has incredible maturity. When you play regularly for PSG at such a young age, it's normal that a national team boss wants to take a look at you. Based on the form he is showing right now, an international call-up was no surprise.

"In training and on matchdays, he is immune to pressure. He has this capacity to stay focused on what he has to do. He knows his strengths and where he has to improve. During pre-season training in the summer of 2022, my staff and I looked at him and we could not believe what we saw. Here was a 16-year-old with the attitude of a player with 200-250 pro games behind him."

The great Arsene Wenger agrees. He recently told the *Le Parisien* newspaper that Zaire-Emery was a blend of Paul Pogba, N'Golo Kante and Patrick Vieira.

Kenan YILDIZ

Juventus (Ita)
Age: 18
Attacking midfielder

Arguably the most gifted youngster currently at Juve, the playmaking virtuoso only made his Serie A debut in August, but is rumoured to be dissatisfied with his amount of playing time. Rated in the €40m bracket, the tall attacking midfielder was on Bayern Munich's books from 2012 to 2022 and scored his first senior goal for Turkey in November.

Leny YORO

Lille (Fra)
Age: 18
Centre-back

After making a handful of first-team appearances last term for *Les Dogues*, the long and lean centre-back has seamlessly moved on to the next level in 2023-24: that of automatic starter. Defensively very solid, always serene and elegant, and precise in possession.

Oscar ZAMBRANO

LDU (Ecu)
Age: 19
Defensive midfielder

The anchor in Ecuador's strong 2023 U20 side, protecting the defence well and spreading the play from centre field. Has had a tough time getting a place in the starting XI of his club side – more experienced options offer more in the final third – but even so, Zambrano is attracting interest from abroad.

The BIG stories of 2024

...before they happen

Nick Bidwell casts his eye over the major football stories of the upcoming year

Spending spree ...who will join Benzema and co. in Saudi Arabia?

1 IS MANCHESTER CITY'S ERA OF PREMIER LEAGUE DOMINANCE ABOUT TO COME TO AN END?

English champions for the past three seasons and pursuing an unprecedented fourth title, City have grown accustomed to dictating terms to the rest of the Premier League. However, no club is entitled to permanent success and certain cracks have emerged at the Etihad Stadium in recent times, making a habit of conceding late goals and recording only four wins in nine outings in November and December. Pep Guardiola won't panic – he has tuned his side to peak after Christmas, and this year they will go stronger with the returns of Kevin De Bruyne and Erling Haaland. But if they don't improve, Liverpool, Arsenal and perhaps even Aston Villa are waiting to pounce.

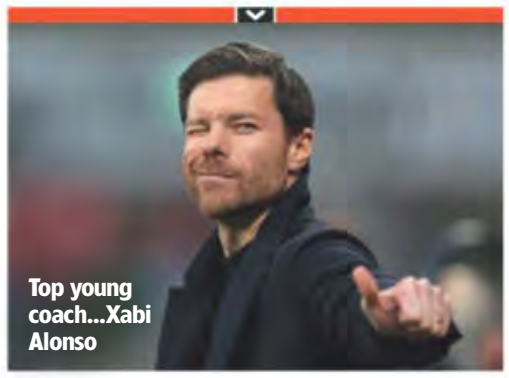
Aiming for a fourth Premier League title in a row...Manchester City

2 ARE GERMANY'S CHANCES OF WINNING EURO 2024 AS BLEAK AS THEY SEEM?

Germany's record in 2023 (six defeats in 11 friendlies and just three wins) suggests that they are in poor health. With the Euros just around the corner, it's hardly surprising that optimism is in such short supply in the host nation – in a poll commissioned by *Kicker* magazine, only 8.1 per cent thought them capable of going all the way this summer. The widespread assumption was that replacing flailing head coach Hansi Flick with the more tactically-astute Julian Nagelsmann would prompt a marked improvement. But, as shown by losses in November to Turkey and Austria, the patient remains bed-ridden, slipshod in defence and lacking a core of influential players.

3 WILL THE SAUDI PRO LEAGUE CONTINUE ITS SHOPPING SPREE FOR WORLD TALENT?

It goes without saying. The Saudis spent a whopping £750 million on players last summer and oodles of cash will once again be available for five-star reinforcements to join the likes of Cristiano Ronaldo, Neymar and Karim Benzema. The focus of the Saudis is not so much on players who may have lost their way at other clubs, but on marquee names. One man they would dearly love to recruit is Liverpool legend Mohamed Salah, for whom Al Ittihad made an unsuccessful £150m bid last summer.



Top young coach...Xabi Alonso

4 WHAT DOES 2024 HAVE IN STORE FOR XABI ALONSO?

For now, the Basque coach's top priority is the Bundesliga title. His Bayer Leverkusen side went into the winter break unbeaten, top of the table and four points clear of Bayern Munich. Statistically speaking, Bayern haven't been particularly bad, only losing once themselves, but Leverkusen have been exceptional. Whatever happens, Alonso's status as one of Europe's outstanding young coaches is now very much established, while his reputation as a classy operator in his playing days will make him an appealing name to any superclub in search of a new head coach.

Unconvincing hosts...Germany

Seeing red ...Manchester United's Diogo Dalot was sent off for dissent in December

5 WILL SIN-BINS ADD TO FOOTBALL'S MELODRAMA?

Subject to approval in March, 2024 may see the introduction of ten-minute sin bins for players guilty of dissent and cynical fouls, after the International Football Association Board (IFAB) recommended trials for the initiative, which has been a feature of English grassroots football since 2019. While a clampdown on abuse of referees will be welcome, the fear is that, in a sport obsessed with scrutiny of officials and criticism of decisions, sin-bins will only serve to provide a new source of controversy to fuel the drama and hysteria that already exists in stadiums and TV studios.

Talented coach... Ipswich Town's Kieran McKenna

6 DO THE SCOTS HAVE A REALISTIC CHANCE OF REACHING THE KNOCKOUT STAGES OF EURO 2024?

History says it will be a bridge too far; in 11 previous appearances at major finals (World Cups and European Championships), Scotland have never progressed beyond the group stage. But why shouldn't Steve Clarke's side buck the trend? Distinctly unimpressed by Tartan ghosts of the past or the reputation of supposedly superior opponents, McTominay, Robertson, McGinn and company have built a well-earned reputation for over-achieving and punishing the unwary.

Some 100,000 Scotland fans will be offering up their vocal chords in Germany and the draw has been reasonably kind, placing them alongside the host nation, Hungary and Switzerland in Group A.

7 CAN IPSWICH PULL OFF BACK-TO-BACK PROMOTIONS?

Something special is stirring in Suffolk. On paper, Ipswich Town should be nowhere near the top of the Championship – last seen in the Premier League in 2002, they only returned to the second tier this season under their rookie manager Kieran McKenna – yet the Tractor Boys were flying. They ended 2023 in second, three points clear of the play-off positions, but McKenna, a former Manchester United youth coach enjoying his first senior job at the age of just 37, will be cautious. A four-game winless run at the end of December shows how quick the tide can turn, and his team will be tested in the second half of the season as Southampton and Leeds United, relegated last campaign, breath down their neck.

Challenging again... Juventus

8 ARE JUVENTUS GENUINE SERIE A TITLE CONTENDERS?

On the basis of their results thus far, the *Bianconeri* certainly have a chance to secure what will be their 37th *Scudetto*. Beaten only once in the league before the turn of the year, Juve have been exponentially growing in confidence of late and though league leaders Internazionale will take some stopping, the Old Lady are anything but out of the hunt. Juve boss Massimiliano Allegri may repeatedly insist that he is not thinking about a title challenge, but does he really mean it? Despite a distinct lack of superstar quality, they form a ferociously competitive and well-organised collective, their desire exemplified by the likes of goalscoring defender Federico Gatti.

Optimistic... Scotland qualified comfortably for Euro 2024

9 CAN THE GREEKS EVER GET A HANDLE ON THE HOOLIGANISM THAT HAS PLAGUED THEIR GAME FOR DECADES?

The will to grapple with the issue is most definitely there. In December, the Greek government announced that all top-flight fixtures would be played behind closed doors for two months, with supporters requiring ID to enter grounds after the ban. In addition, top-of-the-range surveillance cameras are to be installed in all Super League stadia. Will the measures work? Football-related violence is deeply rooted in Greek society and, for at least 60-odd years, thugs masquerading as sports fans have proved a blot on the landscape, a breeding ground for gang culture and political, nationalist and religious excesses.

Memorial...one Greek football fan was stabbed to death in August

End of the fairy tale? ...Istanbul Basaksehir

10 IS THE ISTANBUL BASAKSEHIR FAIRY TALE OVER?

Only founded in 1990 and just a middling second-tier team during the early part of this century, the Basaksehir outfit then went on a spectacular ascent, winning promotion to the Turkish Super Lig, establishing themselves as a bona fide top-four side and claiming their first-ever league title in 2019-20. With Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan backing the brand, the future seemed to belong to them. But now it's all falling apart, wins in short supply, the club hovering around the relegation zone and no cash for the big-money signings they used to make.

11 CAN SEVILLA RECOVER FROM THEIR SHAKY START TO THE SEASON?

Thus far, it's been a nightmarish campaign for the Sanchez-Pizjuan faithful, seemingly trapped in a never-ending spiral of decay, defeat and discouragement. To put it bluntly, nothing has gone right – finishing bottom of their Champions League group, winning only twice in their first 16 games of the La Liga season to plummet down the table and now on their third manager of the campaign. With Jose Luis Mendilibar and Diego Alonso already shown the door, the technical-area baton has passed to Quique Sanchez Flores. Heavily in debt, the reigning Europa League champions are in dire straits indeed.

Struggling ...Sevilla

12 DID BRAZIL MAKE A MISTAKE IN APPOINTING FERNANDO DINIZ?

On the face of it, yes. While Diniz is undoubtedly a fine coach, having recently led Fluminense to the Copa Libertadores crown, his revolutionary tactics were arguably the last thing Brazil needed when his role was supposedly to keep the seat warm for Carlo Ancelotti – a plan now thrown up in the air after the Italian committed his future to Real Madrid. Diniz's philosophy – the freedom of expression, unfettered give-and-gos and dramatic overloads – require a substantial amount of time on the training ground to refine, and a national team simply does not have such a luxury. Brazil's players appear confused, hence their three straight defeats in World Cup 2026 qualification in the autumn.

Tough start ...Diniz

13 CAN GIRONA PULL OFF THE SHOCK OF THE CENTURY AND WIN LA LIGA?

The Catalan club, only in their fourth season in the Spanish elite, are very much the real deal, having won 15 of their first 19 league games and further underlining their credentials with a stunning 4-3 win against Atletico Madrid and magnificent 4-2 victory at Barcelona, their first-ever win against their mighty regional rivals in seven attempts. Expertly led by coach Michel, Girona play with a fluidity, dynamism and *esprit de corps* that others cannot match. Conventional wisdom, however, says that the Big Three (Atletico, Barcelona and nearest title rivals Real Madrid) will eventually haul them in.

La Liga fairy tale...Girona

14 IS CHAMPIONS LEAGUE QUALIFICATION A REALISTIC TARGET FOR BUNDESLIGA SURPRISE PACKAGES STUTTGART?

Since narrowly avoiding relegation from the top flight last season via the play-offs, the Swabians have spectacularly got their act together, amassing 34 points from their opening 16 fixtures – already more than they managed in the entirety of last season – playing attractive football and showing an abundance of desire and team spirit. Full credit to coach Sebastian Hoeness and his charges, though a dose of expectation management would not go amiss. Four of their first-teamers, including ace Guinea striker Serhou Guirassy, are away in January and potentially beyond due to Africa Cup of Nations and Asian Cup commitments.

Sorely missed... Stuttgart striker Serhou Guirassy

Tough season ...Ajax winger Steven Berghuis

15 HAVE AJAX GIVEN UP ON A TOP-THREE FINISH THIS SEASON?

Thoughts of next season's Champions League would have represented pure fantasy when, in their worst-ever start to an Eredivisie campaign, the Amsterdam giants repeatedly tripped themselves up and fell into the drop zone. But the sacking of coach Maurice Steijn and appointment as interim boss of John Van 't Schip has worked wonders. After Van 't Schip took over in late October, Ajax went eight games unbeaten (winning six of them) and were fifth at the winter break, nine points adrift of a Champions League spot. A re-energised Ajax conceivably could bridge the gap in the New Year.

Serious injury ...Neymar

16 WHAT NEXT FOR NEYMAR FOLLOWING HIS KNEE INJURY?

After rupturing his ACL while on international duty for Brazil in a World Cup qualifier last October, the *Selecao's* record scorer is expected to be out for a huge chunk of 2024. Already out of the European public eye following his move to Saudi giants Al Hilal last summer, news that the 31-year-old will also be ruled out of this summer's Copa America is a cruel blow to his recovery plans. Fingers crossed he can regain full fitness and get back on the goal trail for his club come the start of the 2024-25 Saudi Pro League campaign in August.

Copa Libertadores... Marcelo with the 2023 trophy

17 CAN ANYONE END THE BRAZILIAN CLUBS' COPA LIBERTADORES DOMINANCE?

Fluminense's victory at the Maracana in November meant that Brazilian clubs have now won the last five editions of South America's premier club competition, following on from two titles apiece for Flamengo and Palmeiras. Boca Juniors did, at least, prevent a fourth consecutive all-Brazilian final, but the Argentines were always underdogs. Only they and their Buenos Aires neighbours River Plate have been able to challenge Brazil's dominance of the Libertadores in the last five years, and they remain the likeliest rivals in 2024.

Portugal legend... Cristiano Ronaldo

18 IS CRISTIANO RONALDO STILL WORTH A PLACE IN THE PORTUGAL XI?

Tricky one. The 38-year-old Al Nassr frontrunner comes with a wealth of top-level experience and compiled impressive numbers in qualification – his country's leading scorer with ten goals. Of course, he is not the player he was at his peak, but has lost neither the desire nor ability to put the ball in the back of the net. Others may see it differently, regarding him as a luxury player who has to be indulged and who needs others to do his running, making Portugal less varied going forward. Still, it would take a brave man to leave out CR7.

ROBERTO "PICO" LOPES

"I thought my first call-up was spam"

Born in Dublin to a Cape Verdean father, the Shamrock Rovers defender is heading to his second AFCON finals

Before we talk about the 2023 Africa Cup of Nations, Cape Verde started the World Cup qualifiers with four out of a possible six points, drawing at home with Angola and then winning away against Eswatini. Was that a good start?
We had been hoping to win all our home games, which is essential for a World Cup qualifying campaign, but the pitch and the windy conditions sort of levelled out the game against Angola. We had to dig in in the first half, and second half we showed a bit more quality and I think a draw was a fair result. It made the long trip to Eswatini to get a 2-0 win very important. We used the momentum from that game to go into the Cup of Nations.

What did you make of Cape Verde's draw for the Cup of Nations finals?
I had training at the time so I only saw the group afterwards, and then I was taken aback, saying: 'Egypt and Ghana, what chance have we got?' But then you take a few minutes to think about it and I'm absolutely buzzing to play against Mo Salah, one of the best African players to ever play the game. The chance of coming up against him is just incredible, and Ghana have such a strong squad with a lot of them playing in the Premier League. I'm really looking forward to coming up against these top players and testing myself.

Is that what has been the best thing about international football for you – going from the League of Ireland to competing against all these big names?
Yeah, absolutely. You are forced to elevate your level as a player. Obviously, you try not to get too carried away with the big names – but it's a chance to measure yourself. I'm a firm believer that you are always learning in this game and when you come up against players with such quality, you improve your game. If it were up to me, I'd play against all the top teams in Africa! Every international game is a learning curve for me and you get something completely different from each opponent.

This is your second AFCON. Are you still pinching yourself at how you got a chance to play international football?
To be honest, I don't let myself get carried away with that, even with call-ups, I don't really tell people until it's actually confirmed that I'm in the squad. You cannot take anything for granted in international football and especially in our team where there are a lot of up-and-coming, quality young players coming through. No one's place is guaranteed so I'm like a little baby every chance I get to play for Cape Verde. I'm just going to enjoy it for as long as I can. I don't think I'll ever lose that feeling. It has been unreal.

Is this a better Cape Verde side now than the one that reached the last 16 at the last finals in Cameroon?
We have a lot of players who were at the last AFCON still in the squad, and two years ago we came up against some really tough teams and gave a really good account of ourselves. We've got some really talented young players who have since been included in the squad, like Logan Costa, who has done well at Toulouse, and Leandro Andrade at Qarabag. Mixed with the experienced players that we have from that last AFCON, and we have a really good mix. So we're looking to do as well as we did at the last tournament and maybe progress a little further.

The League of Ireland season finished in early November. How do you ensure you are fit for the tournament after two months of not playing?
It was important to give myself a few weeks off, just to reset the mind and refresh. Then I slowly ticked over in the gym for a week or two, after which I was training with the youth teams at Shamrock Rovers and then ensuring I was up at the levels that the others were when we met up for the pre-tournament camp.

You've been at Shamrock Rovers for seven seasons and won several titles, but with your international profile are you hoping for a chance to play at a club outside Ireland?
It's not something I've really thought about, I've always been focused on the job at Shamrock Rovers and trying to win the league or the next game. Nothing else has ever come up. I love playing for Shamrock Rovers, in Dublin where I was born and raised. We've got a great fanbase and I enjoy every minute of it. I don't really get too distracted to be honest with you.

How did your playing international football for Cape Verde come about?
I set up a LinkedIn profile when I was in college but never really looked at it since. I got a message from the then-coach Rui Aguas but he wrote to me in Portuguese. I just thought it was a spam message and I took no notice of it. And then about nine months later he messaged me back, saying: 'Hi Roberto, have you had a chance to consider what I said to you?' I felt so rude for not having replied to him months earlier. I copied the message and put it into Google Translate. And it basically said: 'We're looking at getting new players into the Cape Verde squad and would you be interested in declaring for us?' I was absolutely buzzing with that! I was like: 'Yep, 100 per cent I'd love to be a part of the squad.'

Interview by Mark Gleeson

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CHRIS HUGHTON

"African football is at the best level it's ever been at"

The former Brighton manager talks to *World Soccer* about his role as the head coach of Ghana's national team

Are you on the brink of having a very talented generation of Ghanaian footballers at your disposal?
I'll answer that question in two ways. One, yes. I'm delighted to be head coach of the Black Stars, and with the prospect of these young players that have come through the system and are also doing well at their respective clubs. As a head coach, that's a nice feeling. But Ghana has always produced good young players and, in my time as coach, I've been made aware of so many on our database, so many young Ghanaian lads, be it born in Ghana, or in Europe but able to represent the country. There is a lot of talent out there, who predominantly play in Europe and, of course, in the local league. But I think that producing good young players is something the nation has always done.

How exciting is it for you to have the opportunity to mould many of them into international stars?
I was fortunate to be in Morocco last summer to watch the Under-23 team play in the Olympic qualifiers, and there is talent there. So it's always an exciting prospect, but it's also all about balance because, ultimately, when you are the head coach of the national team, it's a bit about development, but you have these players for a short period of time. Mostly, it's about getting results and qualifying for tournaments. It's about making sure you can blend these younger, exciting players that we have with the experience that you need to win the games that you have to win.

Have you been surprised at Ghana fans' expectations? Any setback seems to be treated like a disaster...
Not a surprise, because although this is my first role in international management as a head coach, I've been aware through my parentage – my father's from Accra. So I've always been aware of what football means to Ghanaians. There's always pressure on the team and on the head coach because what Ghana have in African football, and particularly West African football, is a big name. And with that comes the pressure of getting results. What I have found so far, watching as much African football as possible, is the level of so many countries have improved and I think what it does is make the competition tougher. There's no doubt about that. I think African football is probably at the best level that it's ever been at, with so many African players playing in the good leagues throughout the world.

At the last World Cup you worked in an advisory role – what exactly were you doing with the Ghana team?
My role was as technical advisor, not technical director. The Ghana Football Association have had a technical director for quite some years. The main part of my role was to be a support for the head coach and the technical staff, and also as a go-between with the GFA president. And, of course, to try to mediate and fill in as many holes as possible. The initial contact from them to me was because they felt that there was a role for me to support a head coach [Otto Addo] who hadn't been a head coach before. I enjoyed the experience and worked well with a very good coach. It was a good experience for me, particularly going from there into the head coach role. It was a good learning curve also, to find out as much as I could about the workings and the environment.

Your father was Ghanaian, so this must be a job that is different to anything you've done before, with an emotive edge?
The emotional content is there, yes. My father hailed from Jamestown, Accra. I have been to Ghana on lots of occasions before and, of course, there is huge pride at managing the country. So there's the emotional part of it, but the other part when you are a head coach is what you have to put into the job – that doesn't change, whether you are working at club level or international level. These are all the same ingredients and qualities that you have to assert yourself into the job, to get from the job what you need. From a working aspect not too many things change but emotionally, yes, of course, it's different.

You lost to the Comoros Islands in your last World Cup qualifier...
We were blessed enough to be involved in the last World Cup and that was a wonderful experience for everybody. We had some players who had experienced it before with the Black Stars, but the large majority had not. What that has done is given everybody involved a huge appetite to want to be at the next one. And the only way we can be at the next finals is to qualify through the group. And that makes every single game that we play as important as the next one or the last one. Unfortunately, we lost in the Comoros, but we have plenty more games in this group. And, of course, our aim has to be to qualify.

Interview by Mark Gleeson

Glenn Moore

Change afoot for UEFA Women's Champions League

Change is on the horizon for Europe's elite club competition as this season's Champions League group stage approaches crunch time

Concern over the absence of some of the game's biggest and most marketable names from the group stage of the Women's Champions League did not take long to prompt change.

This season's group stage was barely taking shape before UEFA announced the competition would, from 2025-26, follow the men's event in adopting a modified form of the Swiss system. This will feature 18 clubs, each playing six teams once, with the top four qualifying automatically to an eight-team knockout stage and the clubs 5th-12th playing-off for the other four places.

A second European competition will also be created, incorporating clubs knocked out of the Champions League qualifying rounds with non-champions of some mid-ranking leagues.

These were both options explored in the December edition of *World Soccer*, which highlighted the absence of Arsenal, Manchester United, Juventus and last season's finalists Wolfsburg (all knocked out in the qualifiers) from this season's group stage. Under the new format, this high-grade quartet would get a second chance in the new competition. The leading leagues, however, would still be restricted to a maximum of three clubs in Europe – a blow for a number of ambitious clubs in England's WSL, Spain's Liga F and similar competitions.

In all, the number of clubs in European competition would expand from 70 to 91, with all but 13 of those starting in the Champions League. Nine qualify directly for the group stage, an increase from the current four.

Meanwhile, 24 leagues will have at least two clubs playing European football (up from 16) with 13 of those having a trio involved (up from six).

In a nutshell, there will be more clashes between big teams in the early stages, a safety net for big clubs knocked out, and more opportunities for clubs from mid-ranking associations.

But while the changes will appeal to the power base of UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin, the bigger leagues will still view the changes as a signpost, not a destination. In England, for example, one of Chelsea, Arsenal, Manchester City or Manchester United will still be without European football, while the likes of Tottenham Hotspur and Aston Villa remain locked out.

> There will be more clashes between big teams in the early stages, a safety net for big clubs knocked out, and more opportunities for clubs from mid-ranking associations

Hastening further change might be the renewed prospect of a women's super league after the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruling. A22, the company behind the original men's super league plan, immediately floated the idea of a women's competition featuring 32 women's teams to run alongside the proposed 64-club men's event.

Surprise packages... Swedish side Hacken have impressed in a tough group

Shock...Ajax have beaten both Bayern Munich and PSG

Whatever format the sport ends up with, the group stages were a reminder that reputations count for little on the field. This season's Champions League went into the winter break with Real Madrid knocked out with two games still to play and Bayern Munich in danger of following them.

Real found themselves bottom of Group D with one point from four matches, and that one, at home to Chelsea, was down to poor officiating. The surprise packages were a superbly-organised Hacken, who overcame being out-of-season (the Swedish league having concluded in mid-November) to pick up seven points, one behind Chelsea and one ahead of Paris FC – conquerors of Arsenal and Wolfsburg.

The Gothenburg club lost their title on goal difference to Hammarby on the final day but three days later won in Paris, following up by beating Real and holding Chelsea in London – though the WSL champions won the return.

Ajax were another "minnow" to upset the elite, taking four points off Bayern and beating Paris Saint-Germain in Group C. Bayern were also held at home by Roma leaving them out of the qualifying slots. With three points splitting the quartet, there is all to play for when ties resume in late January.

There were no such problems for the last two winners, Lyon and Barcelona, who booked their quarter-final slots before Christmas. Record eight-time

champions Lyon took ten points out of 12 in Group B, the only blot being a draw at second-placed Brann, conceding in injury time after the risible dismissal of Lindsay Horan.

In Group A, holders Barca won all four of their games, responding to coach Jonatan Giraldez's announcement that he was leaving at the end of the campaign by thrashing Rosengard 7-0. Behind them, Benfica are well placed to qualify, maintaining a three-point lead over Eintracht Frankfurt thanks to a stoppage-time penalty save by their German goalkeeper Lena Pauels when the pair met at the Waldstadion.

Both teams were also dominant at home. Barca went into the winter break with 12 straight wins and a +48 goal difference. Real Madrid, nine points adrift, were a distant second, as a 5-0 defeat in Catalonia underlined. Caroline Graham Hansen, shrugging off the World Cup disappointment with Norway, topped the scoring and assists charts with nine of each.

Lyon were equally imperious, winning all 11 autumn matches with a +43 goal difference. Though 11 points adrift, PSG do have two games in hand, but it seems they are already scrapping for second with rising neighbours Paris FC.

Roma are another club with a perfect record, 11 wins putting them six points clear of Juventus in Serie A with Fiorentina also in the mix. The surprise is the poor form of Milan. In the five seasons since assuming the licence of Brescia, they had never finished outside the top four, yet they went into the break eighth in the ten-team league.

The two other main title races are much closer. In Germany, just one point separates leaders Wolfsburg and Bayern Munich with Frankfurt four further behind. Only champions Bayern are unbeaten, but their 2-1 defeat of Wolfsburg has been offset by a trio of draws, including a shock one at relegation-zone dwelling Nuremberg.

Chelsea, as usual, are WSL favourites but have not had it all their own way. They needed a stoppage-time goal to draw with a Manchester City side reduced to nine and lost 4-1 at Arsenal – who sold a new league record 59,042 tickets for the match.

But Arsenal were then beaten at Tottenham – their first-ever defeat in the North London derby, enabling Chelsea to be top at Christmas and Manchester City three points behind in second, ahead of the Gunners on goal difference.

Elsewhere Benfica, Rangers, Brondby, Twente Enschede and Slavia Prague went into their winter breaks leading their respective leagues with the latter two achieving 100 per cent win rates.

Round-up

Late brace...Netherlands midfielder Damaris Egurrola

UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE

The semi-finals of the inaugural UEFA Nations League will feature France v Germany and Spain v Netherlands, with the winner of the latter hosting the February 28 final. The best two finishers besides France qualify for the Paris 2024 Olympics.

France and Spain sewed up their League A groups early but the others went to the final day. Germany only qualified as Denmark failed to punish the Germans' inability to win in Wales, the Danes beaten at home by Iceland. Two goals in four stoppage-time minutes by Damaris Egurrola earned the Dutch a 4-0 win over Belgium – who also began the day in the mix – to qualify on goal difference despite England's 6-0 win in Scotland. In between that brace, Lucy Bronze's strike in the 93rd minute had briefly put England top on goals scored.

Scotland, Wales, Switzerland and Portugal were relegated to League B, replaced by Finland, Republic of Ireland, Poland and Czech Republic. Four other League A/B promotion/relegation movements will be decided by play-offs.

COACHES ON THE MOVE

Lorne Donaldson, who led Jamaica to the 2023 World Cup knockout stages, has been appointed head coach of NWSL outfit Chicago Red Stars. The 68-year-old has spent most of his career at youth levels helping to develop a number of elite players. Elsewhere, Fran Alonso is also heading for the United States, leaving Celtic for Houston Dash, while fellow Spaniard Jonatan Giraldez is expected to join Washington Spirit when he departs Barcelona in May.

Barca exit confirmed ...Giraldez

MEWIS JOINS HAMMERS – AND KERR

Kristie Mewis has swapped NWSL-winning Gotham for WSL strugglers West Ham United, enabling her to join Sam Kerr, her partner, in London. With Kerr's contract up at the end of the season, Chelsea fans are hopeful that means the Australian will stay in the capital.

London reunion... Kristie Mewis and Sam Kerr

CHANGES AHEAD IN ENGLAND

The top two leagues in England, the WSL and Championship, currently owned and run by the Football Association, are to become an independent company. A government-backed report has pushed for both leagues to be fully professional and floated the idea of this being partially funded by making an exception to the British game's Saturday afternoon broadcast blackout for women's football.

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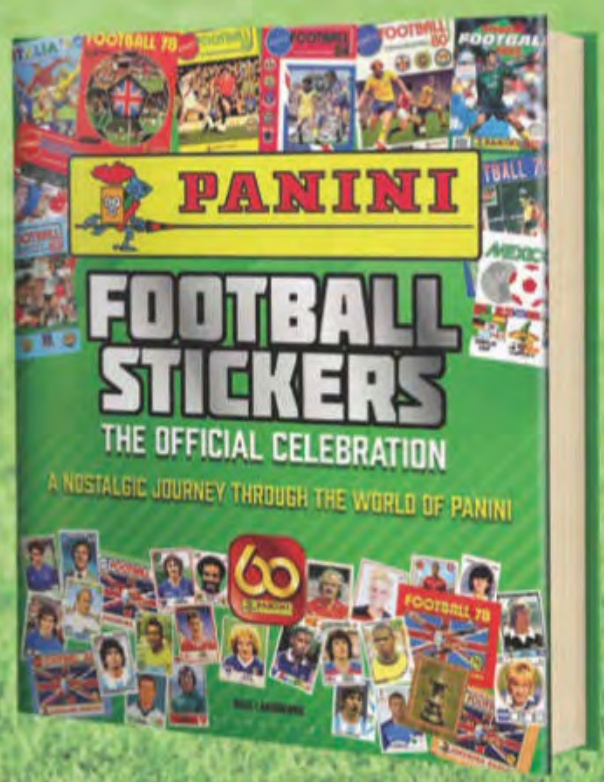

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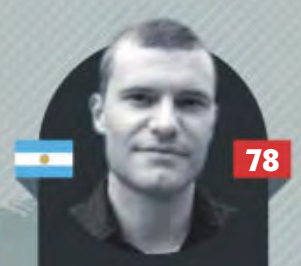

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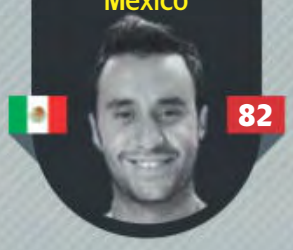

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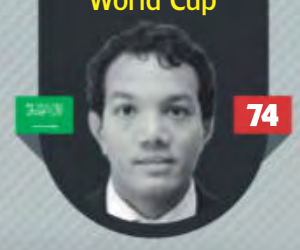

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SAMINDRA KUNTI

End of an era

Manchester City win the final FIFA Club World Cup in its current format ahead of a revamped competition in 2025

Manchester City wrapped up a trophy-laden 2023 with a 4-0 defeat of Brazil's Fluminense to win their first Club World Cup, confirming Europe's dominance of a competition that will expand to 32 teams in 2025.

All it took was 40 seconds for City to take control of the final against the Rio club. Nathan Ake exploited an avenue of space to curl an effort against the woodwork and Julian Alvarez, stepping in for marquee striker Erling Haaland, drew on his instinct to meet the rebound. After all the build-up to the showpiece event, this felt anti-climactic – albeit predictable. It was a reflection of the balance of power in the global game, with Europe far ahead of the rest because of huge investment.

The Brazilians overcame African champions Al Ahly of Egypt 2-0 in the semi-finals, thanks to second-half goals from Jhon Arias and John Kennedy, to reach a final they had long dreamed of. South American and Brazilian clubs attach great importance to the Club World Cup, which is something of a holy grail because of the local bragging rights, European opposition and prestige that it provides. Bangu, for example, still claim a global crown on account of winning the International Soccer League in 1960 and Flamengo supporters wax lyrical about Zico outclassing Liverpool in the 1981 Intercontinental Cup, while in 2012, 30,000 Corinthians fans travelled to Yokohama to see their club triumph against Chelsea in the Club World Cup.

That was the last time a non-European club won the competition. Fluminense had history against them but, on the

World champions... Manchester City's Kyle Walker lifts the trophy

Flared tempers...tensions boiled over at the end of the final at the King Abdullah Sports City stadium

back of their first-ever Copa Libertadores victory thanks to "Dinizismo", the style implemented by their coach Fernando Diniz, the Rio club felt legitimate in their ambitions of toppling City. Diniz had often been criticised for achieving little with his philosophy, but he was vindicated in November when Fluminense defeated Boca Juniors 2-1 to win South America's premier club competition.

Diniz is an outlier in Brazilian football.

Quick-fire start... Alvarez celebrates the opening goal

His team tends to attack, overloading the opponent's midfield. He commands his players to cluster around the ball, often on one side of the field. His style is often described as anti-positional. In a recent column, Tostao, a Brazil 1970 great, hailed Diniz as a great coach because of his organised anarchy.

Manchester City v Fluminense, then, was billed as a clash between European modernisation and classic Brazil, but, in reality, the Rio club didn't stand a chance. After Alvarez's opener, City strolled to victory at a canter, just as they had in dispatching Asian champions Urawa Reds 3-0 in the semis. Nino's own-goal as well as strikes from Phil Foden and Alvarez again completed the 4-0 result, the same scoreline Pep Guardiola's Barcelona destroyed Santos with back in 2011. Just like then, the gulf in class and wealth between Europe and South America was simply too big. The 2023 final provided the perfect illustration: Manchester City's revenue last season was $890 million, while Fluminense's expected 2023 revenue is $74m.

It was the fifth trophy for City in 2023 and Guardiola's fourth Club World Cup, having previously won the crown with both Barcelona and Bayern Munich. Al Ahly claimed the bronze medal with a 4-2 win over Urawa.

City, Fluminense, Al Ahly, Urawa Reds and Mexico's Leon (who had lost to Urawa in the second round) will all return to the competition in the summer of 2025 when the United States stages a revamped Club World Cup, featuring 32 teams. Europe will have 12 representatives, including previous Champions League winners Chelsea and Real Madrid as well as Bayern Munich, Paris Saint-Germain, Internazionale, Porto and Benfica, based on the UEFA coefficient, confirmed as participants.

World players union FIFPro and the World Leagues Forum have criticised the new competition. Both stakeholders pointed to calendar congestion as well as players' welfare. The European Club Association (ECA), however, welcomed the news as "fantastic". Millions in prize money from the Club World Cup will replace lucrative pre-season tours for some of its members. Guardiola himself said that he is not against new competitions but "against the lack of time to recover from year to year" and added: "things should change".

On a mission to globalise the game, FIFA argues that an expanded Club World Cup will level the playing field, but can a team like Auckland City, New Zealand's top amateur club, really expect to compete against the world's best? In Saudi Arabia they fell at the first hurdle against host club Al Ittihad, 3-0. The Saudi side, who spent more than $100m to acquire Fabinho, N'Golo Kante and Karim Benzema, then lost to Al Ahly in the second round. Auckland will feature in the 2025 Club World Cup too, by when the Oceania Football Confederation hopes to launch a professional club league, dubbed a super league. The first edition of the African equivalent, the African Football League, was scaled down from 24 elite teams to eight and hardly represented the feeder league for the Club World Cup that FIFA envisaged.

Manchester City, Fluminense, Al Ahly, Urawa Reds, Leon and Auckland City will all return to the competition in the summer of 2025

With its expansionism, Zurich wants a chunk of the cash-rich club game to supplement its revenue, which is still dependent on the four-year World Cup cycle. FIFA needs the 32-team Club World Cup to be a hit, even if European teams will probably dominate again.

Squads and results on pages 92-93.

Brazil

TIM VICKERY

Botafogo blow it, Palmeiras pounce

More than the race that Palmeiras won, the 2023 Brazilian league season will almost certainly go down as the one that Botafogo threw away

Chasing their first league title since 1995, Botafogo began the 2023 Brazilian national championship like a train, stringing together a sequence of wins while their rivals floundered. By the halfway stage, they had an extraordinary 13-point lead. Too big to lose? Not at all. A collapse of 11 consecutive winless matches meant that they eventually crawled over the line a melancholy fifth.

So, what went wrong? Perhaps the main problem was that everything went too right. At the start of the season, fifth place would have been seen as a triumph. This was not a team that had been constructed to be champions. Portuguese coach Luis Castro assembled the side in 2022, their first season back in the top flight, on entirely pragmatic lines. His Botafogo were strong in the air in both penalty areas. They had quick wingers allowing them to counter-attack. And they were full of physically strong, technically sound players able to work within their limitations. In other words, the idea and the ambition was first-division survival. In the preceding state championship, Botafogo did not even finish in the first four in Rio. Expectations were low –

Title that got away...Botafogo midfielder Danilo Barbosa reacts to another defeat

Star striker...Palmeiras wonderkid Endrick

Brazilian champions... Palmeiras lift the title for a record 12th time

until, suddenly, they were too high.

It did not help that Castro was seduced by an offer from Saudi Arabia. Another Portuguese coach, Bruno Lage, came and went quickly because he tried to tweak the formula. Botafogo ended the season trying to turn back the clock, with the same players and system that they had used at the start.

But the context had changed. As well as the pressure of leadership, and the fear of losing the lead, their rivals were now firing on all cylinders. Brazil's calendar is so cluttered that it obliges clubs to choose priorities. With both the domestic cup and the Libertadores out of the way, the big guns were now trained solely on the league.

Botafogo ended the season trying to turn back the clock

Three clubs went into the last round with a mathematical chance of winning the title. With a front pairing of Hulk and Paulinho clicking and Luiz Felipe Scolari organising an efficient defence, 2021 champions Atletico Mineiro finished the season in style. Winners in 2019 and 2020, Flamengo endured a year of disastrous turbulence before picking up at the end after appointing former Brazil coach Tite. And then there was Palmeiras, winners in 2018 and 2022, who came out on top this time as well.

In the triumphant reign of Portuguese coach Abel Ferreira, just over three years and rising, this was probably the most impressive achievement. His squad was thin. Midfielder Danilo has yet to be adequately replaced since his move to Nottingham Forest. The bench was full of adolescents, and only two players were bought in what was seen as a year of transition. Key midfielder Dudu went down injured, star striker Rony lost form. When, at the start of October, Palmeiras were knocked out of the Libertadores by a very ordinary Boca Juniors, it appeared that the campaign was effectively over.

Instead, Ferreira set about reworking his team. He settled on a three centre-back system to give him more cover in central midfield. And he watched with delight as one of his youngsters came good.

The decisive match of the campaign was on November 1, when Palmeiras found themselves 3-0 down at half-time away to Botafogo. They hit back to win 4-3, and the star turn was 17-year-old, Real Madrid-bound striker Endrick. Up to that point, Endrick had not had an outstanding season, leading some, inevitably, to question the hype around him. But that night he shone not just for his stocky, left-footed ability, but also for his strength of character. "Give the ball to me," the cameras caught him shouting to his team-mates. He was ready, willing and able to tip the balance. Palmeiras ended with a run of eight wins and two draws in their last 11 games. Endrick was their top scorer during this run. He got them over the line. In the only complete Brazilian league season that he will play – for a few years at least – he deservedly shares the spotlight with his canny coach.

A striker at the other end of his career also caught the eye. Back after their surprise season in the second division, Gremio ended up in second place, inspired by Luis Suarez. Had they defended better, a title shot might have been within their reach. That is for next season – sadly, without the Uruguayan.

Final standings on page 94.

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE YEAR
Luis Suarez (Gremio)
The 36-year-old Uruguayan's combination of goals and assists was unmatched. He struggled through knee problems to play every game as if it were his last. A dazzling combination of skill and cunning, ambition and intensity. Set to move on to MLS, and will be badly missed.

Big impact... Luis Suarez

COACH OF THE YEAR
Abel Ferreira (Palmeiras)
His players are in awe of his capacity to have a plan for every situation. Has so much of a young Jose Mourinho about him – in his excesses and his us-against-the-world mentality, as well as in his sharp-eyed intelligence.

NEWCOMER OF THE YEAR
Richard Rios (Palmeiras)
At 23, the Colombian midfielder is relatively old to be considered a newcomer, but he was a virtual unknown when Palmeiras picked him up from second division Guarani at the end of March. Slotted in so well with his all-round game that he is now a Colombia international.

Argentina

JOEL RICHARDS

Review

Historic triumph for Rosario Central

Rosario Central lift the Copa de la Liga Profesional in rare title win, while Boca Juniors have a new club president

For many generations of Rosario Central's supporters, this was their first major title. After a 36-year wait, the *Canalla*, "the Scoundrels", won a top-flight title, the Copa de la Liga, defeating Platense 1-0 in the final.

Central is a social and cultural phenomenon. "Rosario Central does not have history," once wrote the late legendary cartoonist and famed Central supporter Roberto Fontanarrosa, "it has mythology."

Part of that legend merges with the national team. A billboard outside the club's stadium bears the legend "a forger of champions." It shows former Central players Cesar Luis Menotti and Mario Kempes – coach and centre-forward of the 1978 World Cup winning side – as well as 2022 World Cup winner Angel Di Maria.

Yet Central, one of the oldest clubs in the country, only had the 2018 Copa Argentina to show for silverware in the last three decades.

The Copa de la Liga final pitched two of the more modest teams in this year's competition head-to-head. The "Big Five" of River Plate, Boca Juniors, Independiente, Racing Club and San Lorenzo all fell short.

Platense were chasing their first-ever top-flight silverware. The club had the second-lowest budget in the division and had begun the year focusing on avoiding relegation under coach Martin Palermo, the ex-Boca Juniors striker.

Central had sold off their brightest talents earlier in the year. Alejo Veliz signed for Tottenham Hotspur, Gino Infantino joined Fiorentina, Facundo Buonanotte moved to Brighton, and Elche bought Lautaro Blanco.

A brilliant individual goal by Central winger Maxi Lovera proved to be the winner, and into the club's mythology entered the stars of this side. Lovera was back at the club where he had made his professional debut in 2016; penalty-saving keeper Jorge "Fatura" Broun was captain and leader; and the Colombian forward Jaminton Campaz had ten goals and nine assists since arriving at the club in February.

The title also crowned 67-year-old coach Miguel Angel Russo's fifth spell with the club. In 2013, he won the

Campeones... Rosario captain Jorge Broun lifts the 2023 Copa de la Liga Profesional trophy

Match winner ...Maxi Lovera celebrates scoring versus Platense in the final

side promotion back up to the first division. This year, after winning the *Clasico Rosarino* 1-0 against arch-rivals Newell's Old Boys in September, his side simply never looked back, going on a ten-game unbeaten run leading into the final in Santiago del Estero.

With Russo pitched against Palermo in the dugouts, there was an unavoidable reference to Boca Juniors. Palermo remains the *Xeneize's* all-time top scorer, while Russo is the last coach to have won the Copa Libertadores for Boca. And while Central continued their triumphant celebrations into the next day, at the Bombonera some 45,000 members were casting their votes in the club presidential elections.

Standing for the presidency was Juan Roman Riquelme and Andres Ibarra, whose vice-president was the former club president, and former president of Argentina, Mauricio Macri.

Riquelme has a well-documented long-standing feud with Macri dating back to the early 2000s, when he was the brilliant quintessential number ten who guided Boca to Libertadores and Intercontinental Cup glory. Macri was club president at the time. Personal disputes between Riquelme and Macri over contracts, pay and transfers provided the backdrop to these elections, as well as a wider question about Boca's future, and the future of Argentine football.

The electoral process was dragged through the courts over a dispute about which club members were eligible to vote. "They want to privatise the club so members never vote again," said Riquelme.

Riquelme's vision for Boca – that it continues to belong to the supporters – clashes with the concept of the hyper-professional modern game that Macri believes Argentine football requires. This is an ongoing debate that centres on whether Argentine clubs need private finance to improve investment and improve the level of professionalism in clubs, or continue as supporter-owned institutions.

It is a debate that dominated not only Boca's club presidential elections, but also featured during the campaign for national elections, which saw the Libertarian anarcho-capitalist Javier Milei reach the Casa Rosada.

Milei is pushing forward with an unprecedented agenda of privatisation in Argentina, and that includes football. He himself voted in Boca's club elections, but with his vision for the country and its football clubs, and having overseen a 54 per cent devaluation of the national currency in his first week, the new president of Argentina was roundly jeered by supporters after casting his vote at the Bombonera. Riquelme won the elections, commanding 65.3 per cent of members' votes.

Clubs across the country had spoken out in unison during the presidential campaign about their future.

"For its roots, its history, and everything this club represents," posted the champions on social media, "Rosario Central ratifies its position as a non-profit association. The club belongs to its members."

Full standings and results on page 94.

Rosario Central, one of the oldest clubs in the country, only had the 2018 Copa Argentina to show for silverware in the last three decades

Boca Juniors president...Juan Roman Riquelme won the club's election

SEASON'S BEST

COACH OF THE YEAR
Miguel Angel Russo (Rosario Central)
At 67, Russo becomes only the third coach in Argentine football history to win top-flight titles with three different clubs (Central, Velez Sarsfield and Boca Juniors), joining Americo Gallego and Jose Yudica.

PLAYER OF THE YEAR
Jorge Broun (Rosario Central)
Cup competitions create penalty shootout heroes and legends. Broun saved three penalties against River Plate in the semi-final, and made crucial interventions in the final as well.

Penalty hero... Jorge Broun

NEWCOMER OF THE YEAR
Claudio Echeverri (River Plate)
The attacking midielder made just five appearances for River in 2023, but few players awoke such excitement amongst supporters – and scouts – as *El Diablito*, with his stunning performances for Argentina at the U17 World Cup.

SOUTH AMERICAN LEAGUES REVIEW

	HOW THE LEAGUE WAS WON	CONTINENTAL QUALIFIERS	PLAYER OF THE YEAR
Bolivia PRIMERA DIVISION	In another turbulent year, with an enforced pause amid match-fixing accusations, the 17 teams played a league competition, where **The Strongest** beat La Paz arch-rivals Bolivar by an eight-point margin. Bolivar bounced back to win a short end-of-year cup competition.	**Libertadores:** The Strongest and Bolivar **Qualifying rounds:** Always Ready and Aurora **Sudamericana:** Nacional Potosi, Real Tomayapo, Jorge Wilstermann and Universitario de Vinto	**Enrique Triverio** (The Strongest) Nomadic Argentine centre-forward, now 35, whose second season with The Strongest was a triumph. Aggressive leader of the line whose consistent goalscoring (22 in 28 games) was the decisive factor in his club's 16th title win.
Chile PRIMERA DIVISION	There was great drama in the final round of the championship, a 16-team league in which the giants from Santiago struggled. Chasing only their second title, Cobresal began as leaders but were overtaken by **Huachipato**, who claimed their third league win.	**Libertadores:** Huachipato and Cobresal **Qualifying rounds:** Colo-Colo and Palestino **Sudamericana:** Coquimbo Unido, Everton, Universidad Catolica and Union La Calera	**Gonzalo Montes** (Huachipato) All-round Uruguayan central midfielder involved in all phases of the game: winning the ball, organising possession and then appearing in the box to score. Will be hard for Huachipato to keep hold of him for 2024.
Colombia PRIMERA A	There are two separate 20-team leagues per year, with the top eight entering play-offs ending in a two-legged final. In 2023 both went to penalties. **Millonarios** beat Atletico Nacional in the Apertura after a 1-1 draw; in the Finalizacion, **Junior** overcame Medellin after a 4-4 tie.	**Libertadores:** Millonarios and Junior **Qualifying rounds:** Aguilas Doradas and Atletico Nacional **Sudamericana:** Independiente Medellin, America de Cali, Tolima and Alianza Petrolera	**Marco Perez** (Aguilas Doradas) One-time great hope who did not fulfil all the early hopes, but at 33 was the cutting edge of the year's most consistent side. Displayed a focus and a calmness in front of goal that was not always seen earlier in his career.
Ecuador SERIE A	The 16 clubs play two league phases, with the winners meeting in a home-and-away final, which this year was between neighbours **LDU Quito** and Independiente del Valle. After two draws, LDU took the title on penalties to add to their Copa Sudamericana success.	**Libertadores:** LDU, Independiente del Valle and Barcelona SC **Qualifying rounds:** El Nacional and Aucas **Sudamericana:** Delfin, Universidad Catolica, Tecnico Universitario and Deportivo Cuenca	**Alexander Dominguez** (LDU) Veteran goalkeeper, now 36, who has made a triumphant return to his first club. Enjoyed a splendid second half of the year, and with his lanky build he was the hero in the shootouts that won both the league title and the Sudamericana.
Paraguay PRIMERA DIVISION	It was a tale of total domination. Paraguay's 12 teams play two separate league championships, the Apertura and Clausura. **Libertad** won them both, by margins of ten and eight points, and also claimed the cup.	**Libertadores:** Libertad and Cerro Porteno **Qualifying rounds:** Sportivo Trinidense and Nacional **Sudamericana:** Guarani, Olimpia, Sportivo Ameliano and Sportivo Luqueno	**Oscar Cardozo** (Libertad) At the age of 40, the lanky former Benfica centre-forward was top scorer of both the Apertura and the Clausura, and even won an unlikely recall to the national team. Rotated with fellow veteran Roque Santa Cruz.
Peru LIGA 1	There are two separate league phases involving the 19 clubs, with the two winners playing off for the title. This year's final was between the old rivals from the capital, with Clausura winners **Universitario** overcoming Apertura table toppers Alianza Lima 3-1 on aggregate.	**Libertadores:** Universitario and Alianza Lima **Qualifying rounds:** Sporting Cristal and Melgar **Sudamericana:** Sport Huancayo, ADT, Deportivo Garcilaso and Universidad Cesar Vallejo	**Piero Quispe** (Universitario) Diminutive midfielder who blossomed in his second full season. Skipping figure with an interesting pass-and-move game, at his best linking the play and running at defenders.
Uruguay PRIMERA DIVISION	Over the year, 16 teams play two leagues either side of a cup-based tournament. Penarol won the Apertura and **Liverpool** claimed the other two in style. The year boiled down to a two-legged final, where Liverpool beat Penarol 3-0 on aggregate for their first title.	**Libertadores:** Liverpool and Penarol **Qualifying rounds:** Nacional and Defensor Sporting **Sudamericana:** Montevideo Wanderers, Racing, Cerro Largo and Danubio	**Ruben Bentancourt** (Liverpool) Often compared to Edinson Cavani, the rangy striker made his debut in Europe and bounced around Latin America before playing for a series of Uruguayan clubs. Enjoyed the best year of his career aged 30, scoring twice in the final.
Venezuela PRIMERA DIVISION	The traditional two with over 20 league titles between them hit back. Fifteen teams met in a league phase, with the best four then playing a mini-league, and the top two meeting in the final, where **Deportivo Tachira** beat Caracas on penalties after a 1-1 draw.	**Libertadores:** Deportivo Tachira and Caracas **Qualifying rounds:** Portuguesa and Academia Puerto Cabello **Sudamericana:** Carabobo, Deportivo La Guaira, Metropolitanos and Rayo Zuliano	**Luifer Hernandez** (Academia Puerto Cabello) Rangy, mobile striker who was far and away the competition's top scorer. Expected to move on after five years at the club, it will be interesting to see what the 22-year-old does next.

COACH OF THE YEAR		NEWCOMER OF THE YEAR	LIBERTADORES RECORD
Mauricio Soria (Aurora) Former international goalkeeper and coach who, in a year that was dominated by La Paz sides, did well in the second part of the season to ensure a Libertadores place for the second club from the city of Cochabamba.	Bolivian champions ...The Strongest	**Yomar Rocha** (Bolivar) Quick, spikey right-back who did well at the start of the year for the national Under-20 team and showed plenty of promise in his breakthrough season as part of the Bolivar senior squad.	The extreme altitude of La Paz means that opponents typically dread visits to the city. Five times in the last ten years, including Bolivar in 2023, at least one team has been able to make it out of the group phase, but they rarely go any further in the competition.
Gustavo Huerta (Cobresal) The last-day heartbreak should not overshadow a fine year's work by a coach who has a long association with Cobresal. Ended his playing career there, and this latest, fourth spell in charge has lasted six years.	Breakthrough year... Damian Pizarro	**Damian Pizarro** (Colo-Colo) Hulking 18-year-old centre-forward with something of the wild child in him, but also carries the attacking threat that Chile have been crying out for. Ended the year as a full international after starting a World Cup qualifier against Paraguay.	Very disappointing. In the last ten years, only three clubs – Union Espanola (2014), Colo-Colo (2018) and Universidad Catolica (2021) – have made it out of the groups, with only Colo-Colo reaching the quarter-finals. 2023 was the fourth group-phase washout in five years.
Arturo Reyes (Junior) Former national team youth coach has had an interesting time. After a bad start to the year, he needed a police guard when he left Junior in March. Surprisingly brought back in August and carried an under-achieving team to a dramatic title.	Finalizacion winners...Junior	**Edier Ocampo** (Atletico Nacional) Quick and strong 20-year-old right-back who can also figure as a wide midfielder. Did very well for Nacional's Under-20 side and ended the year as a consolidated first-team option.	Underwhelming. Since Atletico Nacional won the title in 2016, only four sides have made it out of the groups. True, two of them were in 2023 – which had not happened since 2015 – but they were soon dispatched. Colombia should surely be doing better.
Luis Zubeldia (LDU) Former Argentina Under-20 midfielder who took up coaching following a serious knee injury. Aged 43 but already has 15 years experience and now possesses some silverware after winning the league and Copa Sudamericana.	Sudamericana champions...LDU Quito	**Kendry Paez** (Independiente del Valle) Much hyped 16-year-old who more than lived up to the fuss. Debuted in February and by the end of the season was an established international who came close to winning the league for his side.	Extremely good in recent times. Only once in the last nine years has no club managed to make it out of the group phase, with Barcelona of Guayaquil, down at sea level, doing just as well as the clubs from the altitude of Quito.
Daniel Garnero (Libertad) Argentine former playmaker who has become Mr Paraguay, winning a league title with Guarani, four with Olimpia and was well on the way to a fourth with Libertad when he took charge of the national team in September.	Veteran striker... Oscar Cardozo	**Romeo Benitez** (Guarani) Slightly-built, tricky winger who likes to cut in from the left onto his stronger right foot, but can go outside as well. Caught the eye in the club's Sudamericana run, and is reportedly on the radar of a number of MLS teams.	Always punching above their weight, Paraguay manages to get teams through to the knockout rounds every year. This time, Olimpia, despite a poor domestic season, knocked out holders Flamengo of Brazil to reach the last eight.
Franco Navarro (ADT) Former international striker who came up with some of the best work of a long and busy coaching career. His modest team ended the year strongly to qualify for their first-ever continental adventure in 2024.	Universitario starlet...Piero Quispe	**Joao Grimaldo** (Sporting Cristal) This was the 20-year-old's break-through year, but he has been on the radar for a while. Quick and aggressive forward in wide spaces – can play either flank or behind the striker – whose impressive form earned a call-up for Peru.	Deplorable. This was the tenth consecutive year that no Peruvian side managed to make it out of the group phase. The only glimpse of good news is that at least in 2023 the teams competed, as Sporting Cristal held both River Plate and eventual winners Fluminense.
Jorge Bava (Liverpool) Switched from being Liverpool's goalkeeper to taking over as their coach in 2021, and the club have not looked back. Sold key players during the campaign and still enjoyed their best-ever year, and did it in style. A name to watch.	Manager of the Year... Jorge Bava	**Luciano Rodriguez** (Liverpool) Spent 2022 in the second tier and was the breakout star of 2023, perhaps more with Uruguay's Under-20 side than at club level. Strong and versatile striker who will surely be on the move soon.	Uruguay's last title was back in 1988 and, in the modern age, it is hard for such a small country to compete. Penarol made the 2011 final; no one has reached the semis since. For the first time in three years, one club (Nacional) reached the knockouts but fell immediately.
Eduardo Sarago (Deportivo Tachira) Just turned 42, Sarago won his first title as far back as 2008. Brought his experience to bear as Tachira won the title with a record 29-game unbeaten run, adapting well to injuries and red cards.	Top scorer ...Luifer Hernandez	**Bryant Ortega** (Caracas) Spiky little 20-year-old central midfielder who moves the ball well. His stoppage-time equaliser in the final – his only goal of the year – forced a penalty shootout and nearly saved the day for his side.	This was the seventh straight year when Venezuela failed to qualify a club for the knockout stages – an understandable run given the lack of tradition and economic problems. The plus side is that talent is being produced. ***Compiled by Tim Vickery***

Mexico

MARTIN DEL PALACIO LANGER

America return to the top

Mexico's most successful club lift their first league title since 2018

Fourteen-time champions... Club America celebrate their Liga MX win

Four days after winning the Liga MX title, Club America played a celebratory friendly against Barcelona in Dallas. The result was a 3-2 victory for the Mexican champions, but it left a significant memory: just before the final whistle, a fan jumped onto the field, ran in front of Xavi and Robert Lewandowski, ignoring them, and went to hug a Spanish player, unknown in his country, Alvaro Fidalgo, one of the stars of the Mexican champions.

Las Aguilas have traditionally been the most powerful team in Mexican football. Owned by the Televisa media consortium, they are the team with the most titles in Mexico, usually invest millions of dollars in new signings every season and are always at the top of the table. However, they had not won a Liga MX for five years, and their demanding fans wasted no time in making their frustrations clear.

For this Apertura 2023, America had opted for a low-profile coach, Brazilian Andre Jardine, who arrived after a decent stint at modest Atletico San Luis. Jardine's CV includes the Brazilian Olympic title at Tokyo 2020, but practically no other experience as a first-tier manager. Furthermore, America had had to settle for him after other more prestigious coaches had rejected their offers.

The first match – a 2-1 home defeat against modest Juarez – infuriated the fans, but after that they did nothing but celebrate. America did not lose again in the regular season, winning 12 games and drawing four, scored 37 goals, making them the best attack in the country, and conceded only 14, making them the best defence. Their dizzying direct style caused a sensation among fans, placed them top of the league and made them favourites in the

Shrewd appointment... America coach Andre Jardine

play-offs, which decide the Liga MX title.

The competition, however, was not going to be easy. In Mexico, as in the rest of the world, the gap between the rich and the poor has grown, and three teams, owned by large companies, separate themselves from the rest in terms of economics and the quality of their squads. One is America and the other two are the powerful teams from Monterrey: Tigres UANL and Monterrey, nicknamed the *Rayados*, who year after year invest in the best Mexican and South American talents.

> **America had not won a Liga MX for five years, and their demanding fans wasted no time in making their frustrations clear**

Added to this group were Pumas UNAM, the team from the National University, traditionally considered one of the "big four" but who, lately, have struggled financially to compete at the top of the table. This season, however, with the help of the prestigious coach Antonio Mohamed and the revelation of the tournament, the 23-year-old Mexico winger Cesar Huerta, they placed fourth in the table.

In the quarter-finals, the first surprise occurred. Monterrey were eliminated by Atletico San Luis, who managed to maintain the 1-0 advantage achieved in the first leg with a heroic defence away from home in the return tie. The other three candidates advanced without complications to the semi-finals.

There, America showed no mercy against San Luis, winning the first leg 5-0 away from home, enough to serenely advance to the final.

The other semi-final had more drama. In the first match, in Mexico City, Tigres defeated Pumas 1-0. In the return leg, however, drama hovered for some minutes. Pumas managed to take the lead after just quarter-of-an-hour, but the dream did not last long – the home side equalised within ten minutes, which was enough to book their ticket to the final.

The two survivors were the two best teams of the season, full of national and international stars. America had Mexico internationals Henry Martin, Julian Quinones, Luis Malagon and Kevin Alvarez, plus Chilean playmaker Diego Valdes and Spanish midfielder Fidalgo. Tigres were betting on their two illustrious veterans, Argentine keeper Nahuel Guzman and legendary French striker Andre-Pierre Gignac, plus a plethora of promising young Mexicans.

Late red...Tigres goalkeeper Nahuel Guzman is dismissed in the final at the Azteca Stadium

The first leg, in Monterrey, was tense, with both teams taking care not to make any mistakes, and leaving no space. The match ended 1-1, with Martin's goal for the away side being cancelled out by a good header from Ozziel Herrera with 20 minutes to play.

The return leg continued in the same vein until the 80th minute, when young winger Raymundo Fulgencio saw red for a reckless slap on Quinones and left Tigres a man down. From there, America were masters of the game, although they had to wait for extra-time to finish their rivals off.

One minute into the resumption and Quinones opened the scoring, unleashing ecstasy inside the packed Azteca Stadium. Five minutes later, Tigres were down to nine men after another unnecessary red card, this time for keeper Guzman who ventured outside of his box to tackle Quinones.

The floodgates opened and America scored twice more to seal their 14th Liga MX title and finally quench the thirst of their demanding fans, who had waited five long years for a celebration like this.

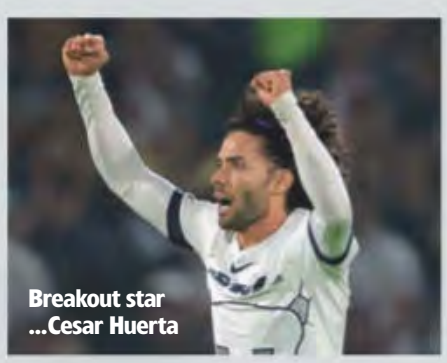
Final standings and play-off results on page 96.

SEASON'S BEST

COACH OF THE SEASON
Andre Jardine (Club America)
Arrived via the back door amid low expectations and made his team a well-oiled machine that completely dominated the league.

PLAYER OF THE SEASON
Juan Brunetta (Santos Laguna)
A little known Argentinian playmaker who impressed at talent-deprived Santos Laguna, scoring ten goals and registering 11 assists in 18 matches.

NEWCOMER OF THE SEASON
Cesar Huerta (Pumas UNAM)
Although not strictly a newcomer, the 23-year-old burst out from nowhere to lead Pumas to the semi-finals and get a spot in the Mexico national team.


Breakout star ...Cesar Huerta

Africa

MARK GLEESON

CAF Champions League

After four group stage games, this season's competition is still wide open

Defending champions Al Ahly have plodded through the group phase of the African Champions League in recent years, only to step up a gear in the quarter-finals and go on to win the trophy. Therefore, supporters of the Egyptian giants will not be overly concerned by a mediocre start to this season's campaign where, albeit unbeaten, they have drawn two of their first three matches in Group D.

The home draw with Algeria's Chabab Belouizdad did raise some eyebrows but it came on the eve of their participation at the Club World Cup, which was a distraction and where they went out in the semi-final to Fluminense of Brazil after seeing off Saudi Arabia's Al Ittihad.

Al Ahly have won three of the last four Champions League titles with last season's runners-up Wydad Casablanca of Morocco taking the other and, on the back of that dominance, both have secured a place in the expanded Club World Cup in the United States in 2025.

But Wydad are in turmoil this season, despite making the final of the inaugural African Football League, and have lost three of their four Champions League matches to sit rock bottom of Group B, needing to win their last two fixtures away against Jwaneng Galaxy of Botswana and at home to leaders ASEC Abidjan of the Ivory Coast in February and March to stand any chance of progress.

Wydad began the group with a shock home loss to Galaxy, who had surprisingly reached the group stage by upsetting South African giants Orlando Pirates on penalties in the second round of the

Defending champions... Egypt's Al Ahly

In turmoil...Wydad

qualifying preliminaries. Thabang Sesinyi scored the only goal to register one of the bigger upset results in the long history of the Champions League group phase.

Wydad then lost away at ASEC before edging Simba of Tanzania 1-0 at home in their third group game with a goal five minutes into stoppage-time from Algerian import Zakaria Draoui. The unconvincing nature of that victory proved the final straw for trigger-happy club president Said Naciri, who fired coach Adil Ramzi, the former PSV and Morocco midfielder, and brought back the 74-year-old Tunisian Faouzi Benzarti for a fourth spell at the club.

But Benzarti's debut away in Dar es Salaam against Simba one week before Christmas ended in a 2-0 defeat and saw Wydad drop to bottom of the group. "Things have become very complicated and the break may give us time to study the shortcomings calmly," Benzarti said afterwards.

The last two rounds of group matches follow the conclusion of the Africa Cup of Nations finals in the Ivory Coast, and ASEC have the luxury of taking their foot off the gas after becoming the first side to book their place in the quarter-finals, courtesy of their superior head-to-head record against Jwaneng Galaxy.

Elsewhere, South Africa's Mamelodi Sundowns are again fancied to break the North African hegemony, particularly after their African Football League success, but have not dominated the group competition as they did in previous years. Perhaps it is a good omen; two seasons ago they set a record of 16 out of a possible 18 points in the group stage only then to be dumped out in the last eight by Petro Atletico of Angola. Last season they drew away at Al Ahly and then hammered them 5-2 in Pretoria but, despite emerging from the group phase as the favourites, did not make the final, coming unstuck in the semi-finals on away goals against Wydad.

This time around their form has not been as convincing, although they posted the only away win in Group A when they beat Pyramids of Egypt 1-0 in Cairo in their fourth group match to share the lead with TP Mazembe of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Petro Atletico, reinforced by signings from Brazil, Honduras and Portugal, are unbeaten in Group C where they lead the Tunisian pair of Esperance and Etoile Sahel. A notable win for the Angolans was away at Etoile Sahel in Tunis and, after four rounds, they had established a three-point lead. Their Portuguese coach Alexandre Santos is among the longest-serving of any of the 16 clubs left in the Champions League field.

The other protagonists in the group are Al Hilal of Sudan, forced to play all their home games in Tanzania because of the civil conflict in their country.

The top two teams in the groups go into the quarter-final draw in March with the knockout round starting on the last weekend of the month. The two legs of the final this year have been set for May 19 and May 26.

Latest results and standings on page 97.

Wydad Casablanca are in turmoil this season, despite making the final of the inaugural African Football League

Chasing the double...Mamelodi Sundowns won the inaugural African Football League in November

Asia

JOHN DUERDEN

Saudis dominate Champions League group stage

Saudi Pro League teams barely miss a step in western groups, while an underdog tale emerges in the east

Review

Increasingly, the Asian Champions League is a story of Saudi Arabia's stars and their fortunes. Not that long ago, the eastern zone (the tournament is divided into two geographic regions until the final) got much of the focus but now China, Japan, South Korea and Australia are playing very much second fiddle.

In some ways, having the likes of Cristiano Ronaldo, Neymar and Karim Benzema in action in the tournament is a real blessing for the Asian Football Confederation (AFC). Promoting the competition across the continent has been a challenge over the years and the presence of superstars makes it easier – wild celebrations of Mumbai City's players upon discovering that they were grouped with Al Hilal and Neymar went viral. It is in danger, however, of becoming one-sided with much of the rest of the tournament barely mentioned.

Yet it is hard to talk about the group stage without talking about the Saudi domination as all four teams made it

Standout strikers...Al Nassr forwards Cristiano Ronaldo, Anderson Talisca and Sadio Mane

through to the last 16, which consists of the ten group winners and the six best performing runners-up.

Between them, the big three lost just one of their 18 combined games. That was Al Ittihad's 2-0 defeat to Al Quwa Al Jawiya of Iraq, the last match that Nuno Espirito Santo had in charge of the club he led to the Saudi Arabian league title in May. Under replacement Marcelo Gallardo, the Tigers still won their group.

Ronaldo scored three as Al Nassr strolled through, although the headlines belonged to Anderson Talisca who bagged six to be joint-top scorer along with fellow Brazilian Cryzan of China's Shandong Taishan. Al Nassr have never won the Asian title but city rivals Al Hilal have done so four times, and also won their group with Neymar getting his first goal for the Blues before picking up a cruciate ligament injury on international duty that ended his season.

While Hilal, Nassr and Ittihad were expected to go through easily, Al Fayha, without the investment and world-famous stars, were not. Yet, in their first appearance in the tournament, the 2022 King's Cup winners squeezed through as the worst of the best runners-up thanks to an impressive 4-1 final-day win at Uzbekistan powerhouse Pakhtakor, inspired by two goals from Zambian forward Fashion Sakala.

Despite that setback, Uzbekistan still have two representatives in the second round: Nasaf Qarshi and Navbahor. Al Ain of the United Arab Emirates and Sepahan of Iran make up the eight from the western zone to make it through. The Iranians were the subject of the biggest story of the group stage when they hosted Al Ittihad. The Saudi Arabians refused to play, reportedly because of three busts that had been placed on the pitchside of General Qasem Soleimani, killed in a US strike in 2020. The AFC gave the Jeddah team a 3-0 win.

Melbourne City heartbreak... Zhejiang celebrate

On the eastern side, there was a shock elimination and a shock progression, both of which featured Japanese teams. Defending champions Urawa Red Diamonds, who defeated Al Hilal in the final just last May to take a third Asian crown, only managed seven points in their six games and were eliminated.

> It is hard to talk about the group stage without talking about the Saudi domination as all four teams made it through to the last 16

Yet J2 side Ventforet Kofu, who qualified by winning the Emperor's Cup in 2022, not only made it through but won their group, the first second-tier team to do so in the tournament's history. "As one of the representatives for Japan, we are very happy that our journey continues," coach Yoshiyuki Shinoda said. "We had great support, our fans came in huge numbers, a great motivation for the players and we knew that we couldn't let them down."

Kawasaki Frontale joined their compatriots in the last 16, while Kevin Muscat's final game in charge of Yokohama F. Marinos ended in style with a 3-0 victory over China's Shandong that sent his team through. The Australian stepped down after succeeding Ange Postecoglou in July 2021 and delivering the 2022 J. League title. Yokohama, Shandong and South Korea's Incheon United all finished on 12 points but United, in their first Asian appearance, missed out due to having an inferior head-to-head goal difference.

Like Japan, three South Korean sides also made it through. Pohang Steelers, Ulsan Hyundai and Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors have seven continental titles between them, while Thailand's Bangkok United also progressed.

City Football Group may be a little disappointed that neither of their entrants survived. Mumbai City were always going to find it difficult in Al Hilal's group, but Melbourne City were kicking themselves after missing out. A goal conceded in the 99th minute of the final group game against China's Zhejiang did the damage and cost the sole Australian representative a place in the next stage, which starts in February.

Results and standings on page 96.

Underdog story...Japanese second-tier side Ventforet Kofu

Venezuela

TIM VICKERY

The road to Paris

Ten South American teams will compete in Venezuela for two coveted spots at this summer's Olympic Games

Holders...Brazil have won the last two Olympic gold medals

Assuming there is no major political fall out from its attempts to annex part of Guyana, then Venezuela will host the South American Under-23 Championship between January 20 and February 11, effectively kicking off the 2024 season in the continent.

The ten nations are divided into two groups. The hosts are together with Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador and Bolivia in the capital of Caracas, while Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Paraguay and Peru meet in Valencia just over 100 miles to the west. The top two from each group go through to the second phase, with the matches staged a little further to the west in Barquisimeto's impressive Metropolitano Stadium.

At stake are two places at the Paris Olympics. This may not seem like a big deal, but Olympic football has a special place in the South American heart. It is possible to date modern football from Uruguay's gold medal – also in Paris – back in 1924, a magnificent triumph that led directly to the birth of the World Cup six years later. And football is what South America does. The wins in 1924 and 1928 are the only gold medals that Uruguay possesses. Paraguay's silver at the 2004 Games is its only medal of any kind.

The importance of qualification, and the fact that only two slots are available, will make this competition fiercely competitive. Brazil are seeking to defend the gold medal they won in Tokyo. After a dreadful year at Under-20 level Argentina are looking to bounce back. Uruguay will be desperate to return to the scene of their triumph of a century ago, and as the reigning Under-20 world champions they would seem to have the raw material to do so. Youth development in Ecuador has been a stunning recent success – they were continental Under-20 champions in 2019 and are continuing to produce. Venezuela were runners-up at the Under-20 World Cup in 2017 and will look to shine in front of their own fans, and Colombia can never be discounted. Nobody can count on an easy route to Paris.

Come the Olympics, the squads can be reinforced with three over-age players – veteran right-back Dani Alves, for example, was the captain of the side that won gold in Tokyo. In qualification, though, a strict age limit of 23 applies – and right up to the moment of the kick-off and maybe even beyond, there will be plenty of headaches for the coaches.

There is no obligation for clubs to release their players. The cream of South American football, of course, is in Europe, usually well before the age of 23, and there is next to no chance of any player who is in or around the first team being freed to take part in this tournament. There is even reluctance on the part of some South American clubs, who may conclude that a period of rest is advisable after the rigours of a long year. And then there is the January transfer window. Last year, Colombia's Jhon Duran was whisked away by Aston Villa on the eve of the Under-20 Championship. After concluding the medical and signing a contract, it was hoped that he would return for the closing stages of the competition, but Colombia waited in vain. The coaches, then, need to plan

> Olympic football has a special place in the South American heart

Preview

Final stage host ...the impressive Metropolitano Stadium in Barquisimeto

with some degree of flexibility.

They may be grateful for the recent trend of South American youngsters sold to the United States. With the MLS season not getting underway until later in February, there are fewer impediments to the participation of key players such as Argentina's Thiago Almada and Paraguay's Diego Gomez.

And the absence of some is always the opportunity for others to step in and make a name for themselves. The Under-23 Championship was not held between 2004 and 2020 (in the interim the Under-20s was used to define Olympic qualification). Now that it has returned it is the closest thing that exists to promotion to the senior ranks. Those who shine in Venezuela will almost certainly be pitched into future rounds of World Cup qualification. For those teams that have started out badly on the road to 2026 – the likes of Paraguay, Chile, Peru and Bolivia – this is the first chance to regroup and search for solutions. What takes place in Venezuela over the next few weeks will have a direct effect on the Paris Olympics, and may also prove to be part of the narrative of the 2026 World Cup.

Under-20 world champions...Uruguay won the U20 World Cup last June

THE DRAW

GROUP A

- Venezuela
- Brazil
- Colombia
- Bolivia
- Ecuador

GROUP B

- Argentina
- Uruguay
- Chile
- Paraguay
- Peru

Solomon Islands

STEVE MENARY

2023 Pacific Games

New Caledonia triumph in tournament undermined by logistical problems

New Caledonia won their eighth Pacific Games title, edging out the hosts in a dramatic gold medal play-off, but the tournament in the Solomon Islands was dogged by travel problems.

A total of 13 sides had entered, but Kiribati did not show up, Tuvalu arrived late and missed their first fixture, and the Cook Islands left early after their group-stage elimination.

New Caledonia were runners-up in 2019 to New Zealand's Under-23 team, who did not enter this time, and coach Johann Sidaner won with a side largely drawn from New Caledonia's Super Ligue alongside two from the French fifth tier: Cesar Zeoula (US Chauvigny) and Lues Waya (USSA Vertou).

Only the early part of the Games was in the official FIFA international window. This deprived the tournament's latter stages of stars such as Fiji's Roy Krishna – now playing in India with Odisha – but the Solomons' Spanish coach Felipe Vega-Arango was able to bring star striker Raphael Lea'i over from Bosnia & Herzegovina, where he plays for Velez Mostar.

Winners... New Caledonia players celebrate in the Pacific Games final

Images credit: sol2023.com.sb

The competition was a rare chance for places barred from FIFA membership to play, but Kiribati, which is only an associate member of the Oceania Football Confederation, opted to stay at home and play in their annual domestic competition, the Te Runga Games.

Fellow OFC associate member Tuvalu had to concede their first Group B game to Papua New Guinea after arriving late, in a result that would ultimately penalise PNG. Granted a 3-0 walkover victory, they then drew 1-1 with Vanuatu but finished second in the group on goal difference, after Vanuatu thrashed Tuvalu 6-0.

Northern Mariana Islands, a member of the Asian Football Confederation but not FIFA, did take part but endured a difficult competition, losing 10-0 to Fiji and 5-0 to Tahiti.

Logistics were a problem and, after beating Tonga 2-1 in Pool A then losing 8-0 to New Caledonia, the Cook Islands left before their placement games due to the travel back home, which national academy director Jess Ibrom described as a "nightmare".

In a statement, the Cook Islands Football Association said: "Prior to the team's departure for Pacific Games, it had been agreed upon within CIFA that should our teams not make it to the semi-finals, they would return early.

"This decision was primarily influenced by the limited availability of flights out of Honiara. Coordinating travel for a group of our size presents a logistical challenge, particularly given that members of our team would potentially be stranded in Honiara for up to two weeks after the conclusion of the games."

In the semi-finals, New Caledonia edged past Vanuatu through a first-half goal from Makalue Xowi, while a Lea'i penalty and a late second-half strike from Micah Lea'alafa saw the hosts beat Fiji. "We actually played well and dominated the Solomons but couldn't score," reflected Fiji coach Robert Sherman.

> Kiribati did not show up, Tuvalu arrived late and missed their first fixture, and the Cook Islands left early

Final action... New Caledonia edged out the Solomon Islands on penalties

The final at the 10,000-capacity National Stadium in East Honiara was sold out but New Caledonia took the lead through Waya. John Orobulu equalised but Shene Welepane put Sidaner's side back in front in first-half stoppage time.

Orobulu levelled again and when New Caledonia had Morgan Mathelon sent off after receiving two yellow cards, the hosts sensed victory but could not find a goal. The game went to penalties but Orobulu, who plays locally for Southern United, could not find the net this time and New Caledonia went on to win the shootout 7-6.

Results and standings on page 98.

JANUARY 19-FEBRUARY 16

Global diary

Games and dates to pencil in for the month ahead

Title deciders

February could see decisive top-of-the-table clashes in England, Italy, Germany and Spain. On February 4, Arsenal take on Liverpool at the top of the Premier League just hours before the *Derby d'Italia* between Internazionale and Juventus kicks off at the San Siro. The following weekend, in one of the most eagerly-anticipated Bundesliga clashes in years, title-chasing Bayer Leverkusen host Bayern Munich, while in Spain, La Liga has its own showdown between the traditional giants and the season's surprise packages as Real Madrid battle Girona.

Six-pointer...Bayern Munich and Bayer Leverkusen drew back in September

WSL returns

The Women's Super League returns from its winter break on Saturday, January 20 with title hopefuls Arsenal hosting Everton. As it stands, Chelsea lead Manchester City and the Gunners by just three points, but that lead will be tested when the Blues face fourth-placed Manchester United on the first weekend back.

Domestic cups

The first legs of the English League Cup semi-finals took place on January 9-10, two weeks before the second legs, with Championship side Middlesbrough drawn against Chelsea, and Liverpool facing Fulham in an all-Premier League encounter. In Germany, the DFB-Pokal quarter-finals take place on the final weekend of January with Bayer Leverkusen v Stuttgart the standout tie, while the same stage of the Spanish Copa del Rey is a week earlier. Meanwhile, the Coupe de France's round of 32 and last 16 take place over the next fortnight.

South American restart

After the 2024 Olympic qualifiers kicks off football on the continent, the first round of qualifying for the Copa Libertadores begins on February 6. Domestic football returns to Brazil, in the form of the 27 different State Championships, and Argentina (Copa Argentina) from mid-January. The national leagues of Colombia, Paraguay and Peru also restart in January, with the domestic seasons in Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Uruguay and Venezuela kicking off in February.

Up for grabs... Copa Libertadores

5 unmissable matches

- **Leicester City v Ipswich Town, January 22**
  The top two sides in the Championship (at the time of writing) ought to serve up a fascinating clash under the lights at the Foxes' King Power Stadium.

- **Chelsea Women v Real Madrid Women, January 24**
  Chelsea can book their place in the quarter-finals of the Champions League against already-eliminated Real Madrid. After their first meeting ended 2-2, this could be a cracker.

Big clash...Jess Carter challenges Olga Carmona

- **Asian Cup final, February 10**
  The Lusail Stadium prepares to host another major international final – hopefully it will be as exciting as Argentina's dramatic victory against France in the 2022 World Cup.

- **AFCON final, February 11**
  The following day, the new kings of Africa will be crowned in Abidjan's Alassane Outtara Stadium. For UK viewers, the match kicks off at 8pm.

- **Paris Saint-Germain v Real Sociedad, February 14**
  On paper this looks a straightforward home win in the Champions League last 16, but *La Real* have the potential to spring a surprise in Paris. The Basques conceded just twice in the group stage.

League of Ireland kick-off

The 2024 League of Ireland season begins on Friday, February 16 with Stephen Bradley's Shamrock Rovers aiming to become the first Irish club ever to win five consecutive LOI titles. Galway United return to the top flight for the first time since 2017, and are joined by Waterford who earned their place in the Premier Division after beating Cork City in the play-offs. Sean Creedon will preview the new campaign in *World Soccer*'s March edition.

2023 CLUB WORLD CUP

AL AHLY (EGY)

GOALKEEPERS

1	Mohamed **EL SHENAWY**	(34) 18.12.88
16	Hamza **ALAA**	(22) 01.03.01
31	Mostafa **SHOBEIR**	(23) 15.05.00

DEFENDERS

2	Khaled **ABDELFATTAH**	(24) 22.01.99
5	Ramy **RABIA**	(30) 20.05.93
6	Yasser **IBRAHIM**	(29) 10.02.93
8	Akram **TAWFIK**	(26) 08.11.97
13	Marwan **ATTIA**	(25) 01.08.98
21	Ali **MAALOUL** (Tun)	(33) 01.01.90
24	Mohamed **ABDELMONEM**	(24) 01.02.99
28	Karim **FOUAD**	(24) 01.10.99
30	Mohamed **HANY**	(28) 02.02.96
33	Karis **EL DEBES**	(20) 03.06.03

MIDFIELDERS

14	Hussein **EL SHAHAT**	(31) 21.06.92
15	Aliou **DIENG** (Mli)	(26) 16.10.97
17	Amr **EL SOLIA**	(33) 02.04.90
19	Magdy **AFSHA**	(27) 06.03.96
22	Emam **ASHOUR**	(25) 20.02.98
29	Taher **MOHAMED**	(26) 07.03.97
36	Ahmed **KOKA**	(22) 04.07.01

FORWARDS

7	**KAHRABA**	(29) 13.04.94
10	Percy **TAU** (RSA)	(29) 13.05.94
27	Anthony **MODESTE** (Fra)	(35) 14.04.88

COACH

	Marcel **KOLLER** (Sui)	(62) 11.11.60

AL ITTIHAD (KSA)

GOALKEEPERS

1	Abdullah **AL MAYOUF**	(36) 23.01.87
34	Marcelo **GROHE** (Bra)	(36) 13.01.87
88	Osama **AL MERMESH**	(20) 06.07.03

DEFENDERS

4	Omar **HAWSAWI**	(38) 27.09.85
12	Zakaria **HAWSAWI**	(22) 12.01.01
13	Muhannad **AL SHANQITI**	(24) 12.03.99
15	Hassan **KADESH**	(31) 26.09.92
25	Suwailem **AL MENHALI**	(19) 17.04.04
26	Ahmed **HEGAZY** (Egy)	(32) 25.01.91
28	Ahmed **BAMASUD**	(28) 22.11.95
33	Madallah **AL OLAYAN**	(29) 25.08.94

MIDFIELDERS

6	Sultan **AL FARHAN**	(27) 25.09.96
7	N'Golo **KANTE** (Fra)	(32) 29.03.91
8	**FABINHO** (Bra)	(30) 23.10.93
10	Igor **CORONADO** (Bra)	(31) 18.08.92
11	**JOTA** (Por)	(24) 30.03.99
16	Faisal **AL GHAMDI**	(22) 13.08.01
17	Marwan **AL SAHAFI**	(19) 17.02.04
24	Abdulrahman **ALOBUD**	(28) 01.06.95
77	Saleh **AL AMRI**	(30) 14.10.93

FORWARDS

9	Karim **BENZEMA** (Fra)	(35) 19.12.87
90	**ROMARINHO** (Bra)	(33) 12.12.90
99	Abderazzak **HAMDALLAH** (Mar)	(32) 17.12.90

COACH

	Marcelo **GALLARDO** (Arg)	(47) 18.01.76

AUCKLAND CITY (NZL)

GOALKEEPERS

1	Conor **TRACEY**	(26) 13.04.97
18	Sebastian **CIGANDA** (Uru)	(30) 30.08.93
24	Joe **WALLIS**	(18) 07.06.05

DEFENDERS

2	Mario **ILICH**	(28) 23.06.95
3	Adam **MITCHELL**	(27) 01.06.96
4	Christian **GRAY**	(27) 29.11.96
6	Adam **BELL**	(19) 12.02.04
12	Regont **MURATI**	(27) 14.05.96
13	Nathan **LOBO**	(21) 16.12.02
23	Alfie **ROGERS**	(28) 06.02.95

MIDFIELDERS

5	Timothy **BOULET** (Van)	(27) 29.11.96
7	Cameron **HOWIESON**	(28) 22.12.94
8	Gerard **GARRIGA** (Spa)	(30) 28.05.93
10	Dylan **MANICKUM**	(31) 16.06.92
14	Jordan **VALE**	(29) 15.01.94
15	Aidan **CAREY**	(22) 10.07.01
22	Zhou **TONG** (Chn)	(33) 12.01.90
25	Michael **DEN HEIJER**	(27) 14.04.96

FORWARDS

9	Angus **KILKOLLY**	(27) 18.04.96
11	Ryan **DE VRIES**	(32) 14.09.91
16	Joe **LEE**	(21) 12.07.02
19	Liam **GILLION**	(21) 17.10.02
20	Emiliano **TADE** (Arg)	(35) 03.03.88

COACH

	Albert **RIERA** (Spa)	(39) 28.12.83

FLUMINENSE (BRA)

GOALKEEPERS

1	**FABIO**	(43) 30.09.80
22	**PEDRO RANGEL**	(23) 29.06.00
98	**VITOR EUDES**	(25) 21.10.98

DEFENDERS

2	**SAMUEL XAVIER**	(33) 06.06.90
4	**MARLON**	(28) 07.09.95
12	**MARCELO**	(35) 12.05.88
23	**GUGA**	(25) 29.08.98
30	**FELIPE MELO**	(40) 26.06.83
33	**NINO**	(26) 10.04.97
40	**DIOGO BARBOSA**	(31) 17.08.92
44	**DAVID BRAZ**	(36) 21.05.87

MIDFIELDERS

5	**ALEXSANDER**	(20) 08.10.03
7	**ANDRE**	(22) 16.07.01
8	Matheus **MARTINELLI**	(22) 05.10.01
10	Paulo Henrique **GANSO**	(34) 12.10.89
20	**DANIEL**	(27) 11.01.96
21	Jhon **ARIAS** (Col)	(26) 21.09.97
29	**THIAGO SANTOS**	(34) 05.09.89
45	**LIMA**	(27) 11.06.96

FORWARDS

9	**JOHN KENNEDY**	(21) 18.05.02
11	**KENO**	(34) 10.09.89
14	German **CANO** (Arg)	(35) 02.01.88
38	Yony **GONZALEZ** (Col)	(27) 11.07.94

COACH

	Fernando **DINIZ**	(49) 27.03.74

LEON (MEX)

GOALKEEPERS

1	Alfonso **BLANCO**	(36) 31.07.87
3	Oscar **GARCIA**	(20) 02.07.03
30	Rodolfo **COTA**	(36) 03.07.87

DEFENDERS

6	William **TESILLO** (Col)	(33) 02.02.90
7	Ivan **MORENO**	(25) 17.01.98
21	Jaine **BARREIRO** (Col)	(29) 16.06.94
22	Adonis **FRIAS** (Arg)	(25) 17.03.98
24	Osvaldo **RODRIGUEZ**	(27) 10.09.96
25	Paul **BELLON**	(26) 04.06.97
34	Oscar **VILLA**	(22) 24.02.01

MIDFIELDERS

5	Fidel **AMBRIZ**	(20) 21.03.03
8	Jose Ivan **RODRIGUEZ**	(27) 17.06.96
11	Elias **HERNANDEZ**	(35) 29.04.88
13	Angel **MENA** (Ecu)	(35) 21.01.88
16	Omar **FERNANDEZ** (Col)	(30) 11.02.93
23	Borja **SANCHEZ** (Spa)	(27) 26.02.96
28	David **RAMIREZ**	(28) 14.12.95
29	Lucas **ROMERO** (Arg)	(29) 18.04.94

FORWARDS

9	Brian **RUBIO**	(27) 09.11.96
17	Nicolas **LOPEZ** (Uru)	(30) 01.10.93
18	Federico **VINAS** (Uru)	(25) 30.06.98
20	Alfonso Alvarado **PLATANO**	(23) 15.03.00
32	Sebastian **SANTOS**	(20) 21.01.03

COACH

	Nicolas **LARCAMON** (Arg)	(39) 11.08.84

Record breaker...Karim Benzema became the first player to score at four CWC finals

Injured...Haaland, Doku and De Bruyne (not pictured) missed out for Man City

MANCHESTER CITY (ENG)

GOALKEEPERS

18	Stefan **ORTEGA** (Ger)	(31) 06.11.92
31	**EDERSON** (Bra)	(30) 17.08.93
33	Scott **CARSON**	(38) 03.09.85

DEFENDERS

2	Kyle **WALKER**	(33) 28.05.90
3	Ruben **DIAS** (Por)	(26) 14.05.97
5	John **STONES**	(29) 28.05.94
6	Nathan **AKE** (Ned)	(28) 18.02.95
21	Sergio **GOMEZ** (Spa)	(23) 04.09.00
24	Josko **GVARDIOL** (Cro)	(21) 23.01.02
25	Manuel **AKANJI** (Sui)	(28) 19.07.95
68	Max **ALLEYNE**	(18) 21.07.05
82	Rico **LEWIS**	(19) 21.11.04

MIDFIELDERS

4	Kalvin **PHILLIPS**	(28) 02.12.95
8	Mateo **KOVACIC** (Cro)	(29) 06.05.94
10	Jack **GREALISH**	(28) 10.09.95
16	**RODRI** (Spa)	(27) 22.06.96
20	Bernardo **SILVA** (Por)	(29) 10.08.94
27	Matheus **NUNES** (Por)	(25) 27.08.98
47	Phil **FODEN**	(23) 28.05.00
76	Mahamadou **SUSOHO** (Spa)	(18) 20.01.05

FORWARDS

19	Julian **ALVAREZ** (Arg)	(23) 31.01.00
52	Oscar **BOBB** (Nor)	(20) 12.07.03
92	Micah **HAMILTON**	(20) 13.11.03

COACH

	Pep **GUARDIOLA** (Spa)	(52) 18.01.71

URAWA REDS (JPN)

GOALKEEPERS

1	Shusaku **NISHIKAWA**	(37) 18.06.86
16	Ayumi **NIEKAWA**	(29) 12.05.94
31	Shun **YOSHIDA**	(27) 28.11.96

DEFENDERS

2	Hiroki **SAKAI**	(33) 12.04.90
4	Takuya **IWANAMI**	(29) 18.06.94
5	Marius **HOIBRATEN** (Nor)	(28) 23.01.95
26	Takuya **OGIWARA**	(24) 23.11.99
28	Alexander **SCHOLZ** (Den)	(31) 24.10.92
66	Ayumu **OHATA**	(22) 27.04.01

MIDFIELDERS

3	Atsuki **ITO**	(25) 11.08.98
8	Yoshio **KOIZUMI**	(27) 05.10.96
10	Shoya **NAKAJIMA**	(29) 23.08.94
14	Takahiro **SEKINE**	(28) 19.04.95
15	Takahiro **AKIMOTO**	(25) 31.01.98
19	Ken **IWAO**	(35) 18.04.88
21	Tomoaki **OKUBO**	(25) 23.07.98
22	Kai **SHIBATO**	(28) 24.11.95
25	Kaito **YASUI**	(23) 09.02.00
27	Ekanit **PANYA** (Tha)	(24) 21.10.99

FORWARDS

9	Bryan **LINSSEN** (Ned)	(33) 08.10.90
11	Jose **KANTE** (Gui)	(33) 27.09.90
17	Alex **SCHALK** (Ned)	(31) 07.08.92
30	Shinzo **KOROKI**	(37) 31.07.86

COACH

	Maciej **SKORZA** (Pol)	(51) 10.01.72

(Ages as of 12.12.23)

Club Football

WORLD

2023 FIFA CLUB WORLD CUP

First Round

Dec 12 – Jeddah
Al Ittihad (KSA) 3 (Romarinho 29, Kante 34, Benzema 40)
Auckland City (Nzl) 0

Second Round

Dec 15 – Jeddah
Leon (Mex) 0
Urawa Reds (Jpn) 1 (Schalk 78)

Dec 15 – Jeddah
Al Ahly (Egy) 3 (Maaloul 21 pen, El Shahat 59, Ashour 62)
Al Ittihad (KSA) 1 (Benzema 90+2)

Semi-Finals

Dec 18 – Jeddah
Fluminense (Bra) 2 (Arias 71 pen, Kennedy 90)
Al Ahly (Egy) 0

Dec 19 – Jeddah
Urawa Reds (Jpn) 0
Manchester City (Eng) 3 (Hoibraten 45+1 og, Kovacic 52, Silva 59)

Third-Place Play-Off

Dec 22 – Jeddah
Urawa Reds (Jpn) 2 (Kante 43, Scholz 54 pen)
Al Ahly (Egy) 4 (Ibrahim 19, Tau 25, Koizumi 60 og, Maaloul 90+8)

Final

Dec 22 – Jeddah
Manchester City (Eng) 4 (Alvarez 1, 88, Nino 27 og, Foden 72)
Fluminense (Bra) 0

EUROPE

2023-24 UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group A

Dec 12 – Manchester
Manchester United (Eng) 0
Bayern Munich (Ger) 1 (Coman 70)

Dec 12 – Copenhagen
Copenhagen (Den) 1 (Lerager 58)
Galatasaray (Tur) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bayern Munich (Q)	6	5	1	0	12	6	16
Copenhagen (Q)	6	2	2	2	8	8	8
Galatasaray*	6	1	2	3	10	13	5
Man United	6	1	1	4	12	15	4

*Drop into Europa League play-offs

Group B

Dec 12 – Lens
Lens (Fra) 2 (Frankowski 63 pen, Fulgini 90+6)
Sevilla (Spa) 1 (Ramos 79 pen)

Dec 12 – Eindhoven
PSV (Ned) 1 (Vertessen 50)
Arsenal (Eng) 1 (Nketiah 42)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Arsenal (Q)	6	4	1	1	16	4	13
PSV (Q)	6	2	3	1	8	10	9
Lens*	6	2	2	2	6	11	8
Sevilla	6	0	2	4	7	12	2

*Drop into Europa League play-offs

Group C

Dec 12 – Naples
Napoli (Ita) 2 (Saatci 9 og, Osimhen 33)
Braga (Por) 0

Dec 12 – Berlin
Union Berlin (Ger) 2 (Volland 45+1, Kral 85)
Real Madrid (Spa) 3 (Joselu 61, 72, Ceballos 89)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Real Madrid (Q)	6	6	0	0	16	7	18
Napoli (Q)	6	3	1	2	10	9	10
Braga*	6	1	1	4	6	12	4
Union Berlin	6	0	2	4	6	10	2

*Drop into Europa League play-offs

Group D

Dec 12 – Milan
Internazionale (Ita) 0
Real Sociedad (Spa) 0

Dec 12 – Salzburg
Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 1 (Sucic 57)
Benfica (Por) 3 (Di Maria 32, Rafa Silva 45+1, Cabral 90+2)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Real Sociedad (Q)	6	3	3	0	7	2	12
Inter (Q)	6	3	3	0	8	5	12
Benfica*	6	1	1	4	7	11	4
RB Salzburg	6	1	1	4	4	8	4

*Drop into Europa League play-offs

Group E

Dec 13 – Madrid
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 2 (Griezmann 6, Lino 51)
Lazio (Ita) 0

Dec 13 – Glasgow
Celtic (Sco) 2 (Palma 33 pen, Lagerbielke 90+1)
Feyenoord (Ned) 1 (Minteh 82)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Atletico Madrid (Q)	6	4	2	0	17	6	14
Lazio (Q)	6	3	1	2	7	7	10
Feyenoord*	6	2	0	4	9	10	6
Celtic	6	1	1	4	5	15	4

*Drop into Europa League play-offs

Group F

Dec 13 – Dortmund
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 1 (Adeyemi 51)
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 1 (Zaire-Emery 56)

Dec 13 – Newcastle
Newcastle United (Eng) 1 (Joelinton 33)
Milan (Ita) 2 (Pulisic 59, Chukwueze 84)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
B. Dortmund (Q)	6	3	2	1	7	4	11
PSG (Q)	6	2	2	2	9	8	8
Milan*	6	2	2	2	5	8	8
Newcastle	6	1	2	3	6	7	5

*Drop into Europa League play-offs

Group G

Dec 13 – Leipzig
RB Leipzig (Ger) 2 (Sesko 51, Forsberg 56)
Young Boys (Sui) 1 (Colley 53)

Dec 13 – Belgrade
Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 2 (Hwang In-beom 76, Katai 90+1)
Manchester City (Eng) 3 (Hamilton 19, Bobb 62, Phillips 85 pen)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Man City (Q)	6	6	0	0	18	7	18
RB Leipzig (Q)	6	4	0	2	13	10	12
Young Boys*	6	1	1	4	7	13	4
Red Star	6	0	1	5	7	15	1

*Drop into Europa League play-offs

Group H

Dec 13 – Porto
Porto (Por) 5 (Galeno 9, 43, Taremi 62, Pepe 75, Conceicao 82)
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 3 (Sikan 29, Eustaquio 72 og, Eguinaldo 88)

Dec 13 – Antwerp
Antwerp (Bel) 3 (Vermeeren 2, Janssen 56, Ilenikhena 90+2)
Barcelona (Spa) 2 (Torres 35, Guiu 90+1)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Barcelona (Q)	6	4	0	2	12	6	12
Porto (Q)	6	4	0	2	15	8	12
Shakhtar*	6	3	0	3	10	12	9
Antwerp	6	1	0	5	6	17	3

*Drop into Europa League play-offs

2023-24 UEFA EUROPA LEAGUE

Group A

Dec 14 – London
West Ham United (Eng) 2 (Kudus 14, Alvarez 42)
Freiburg (Ger) 0

Dec 14 – Piraeus
Olympiakos (Gre) 5 (El Kaabi 21, Podence 40, 42, Ilic 46 og, El-Arabi 68)
TSC (Srb) 2 (Dakovac 48, Cirkovic 61)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
West Ham (Q)	6	5	0	1	10	4	15
Freiburg*	6	4	0	2	17	7	12
Olympiakos**	6	2	1	3	11	14	7
TSC	6	0	1	5	6	19	1

*Advance to knockout round play-offs
**Drop into Europa Conference League play-offs

Group B

Dec 14 – Amsterdam
Ajax (Ned) 3 (Akpom 5, 56, Taylor 20)
AEK Athens (Gre) 1 (Garcia 11)

Dec 14 – Brighton
Brighton & Hove Albion (Eng) 1 (Joao Pedro 88)
Marseille (Fra) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Brighton (Q)	6	4	1	1	10	5	13
Marseille*	6	3	2	1	14	10	11
Ajax**	6	1	2	3	10	13	5
AEK Athens	6	1	1	4	6	12	4

*Advance to knockout round play-offs
**Drop into Europa Conference League play-offs

Group C

Dec 14 – Seville
Real Betis (Spa) 2 (Miranda 14, Perez 37)
Rangers (Sco) 3 (Sima 10, Dessers 20, Roofe 78)

Dec 14 – Limassol
Aris Limassol (Cyp) 1 (Bengtsson 84)
Sparta Prague (Cze) 3 (Kuchta 4, Birmancevic 11, 45+1)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Rangers (Q)	6	3	2	1	8	6	11
Sparta Prague*	6	3	1	2	9	7	10
Real Betis**	6	3	0	3	9	7	9
Aris Limassol	6	1	1	4	7	13	4

*Advance to knockout round play-offs
**Drop into Europa Conference League play-offs

Group D

Dec 14 – Lisbon
Sporting (Por) 3 (Gyokeres 39, Inacio 60, 70)
Sturm Graz (Aut) 0

Dec 14 – Sosnowiec
Rakow Czestochowa (Pol) 0
Atalanta (Ita) 4 (Muriel 14, 72, Bonfanti 27, De Ketelaere 90+2)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Atalanta (Q)	6	4	2	0	12	4	14
Sporting*	6	3	2	1	10	6	11
Sturm Graz**	6	1	1	4	9	9	4
Rakow	6	1	1	4	3	10	4

*Advance to knockout round play-offs
**Drop into Europa Conference League play-offs

Group E

Dec 14 – Brussels
Union SG (Bel) 2 (Amoura 32, Puertas 43)
Liverpool (Eng) 1 (Quansah 40)

Dec 14 – Linz
LASK (Aut) 1 (Ljubicic 61)
Toulouse (Fra) 2 (Dallinga 54, Suazo 83)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Liverpool (Q)	6	4	0	2	17	7	12
Toulouse*	6	3	2	1	8	9	11
Union SG**	6	2	2	2	5	8	8
LASK	6	1	0	5	6	12	3

*Advance to knockout round play-offs
**Drop into Europa Conference League play-offs

Group F

Dec 14 – Rennes
Rennes (Fra) 2 (Assignon 37, Blas 79)
Villarreal (Spa) 3 (G. Moreno 36 pen, Akhomach 62, Parejo 80)

Dec 14 – Athens
Panathinaikos (Gre) 1 (Ioannidis 89)
Maccabi Haifa (Isr) 2 (David 20, Chery 74)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Villarreal (Q)	6	4	1	1	9	7	13
Rennes*	6	4	0	2	13	6	12
Maccabi Haifa**	6	1	2	3	3	9	5
Panathinaikos	6	1	1	4	7	10	4

*Advance to knockout round play-offs
**Drop into Europa Conference League play-offs

Group G

Dec 14 – Rome
Roma (Ita) 3 (Lukaku 11, Belotti 32, Pisilli 90+3)
Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda) 0

Dec 14 – Prague
Slavia Prague (Cze) 4 (Doudera 15, Schranz 25, Chytil 30, 45+1)
Servette (Sui) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Slavia Prague (Q)	6	5	0	1	17	4	15
Roma*	6	4	1	1	12	4	13
Servette**	6	1	2	3	4	13	5
Sheriff Tiraspol	6	0	1	5	5	17	1

*Advance to knockout round play-offs
**Drop into Europa Conference League play-offs

Group H

Dec 14 – Leverkusen
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 5 (Schick 6, Tapsoba 22, Ellingsen 25 og, Hlozek 60, 70)
Molde (Nor) 1 (Kitolano 75)

Dec 14 – Baku
Qarabag (Aze) 2 (L. Andrade 1, Benzia 45+4)
Hacken (Swe) 1 (Guseynov 90+4 og)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Leverkusen (Q)	6	6	0	0	19	3	18
Qarabag*	6	3	1	2	7	9	10
Molde**	6	2	1	3	12	12	7
Hacken	6	0	0	6	3	17	0

*Advance to knockout round play-offs
**Drop into Europa Conference League play-offs

2023-24 UEFA CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Group A

Dec 14 – Bratislava
Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 1 (Blackman 27)
Olimpija Ljubljana (Svn) 2 (Pedro Lucas 17, 58)

Dec 14 – Lille
Lille (Fra) 3 (Yazici 29 pen, Gomes 87 pen, Zhegrova 90+6 pen)
KI Klaksvik (Fro) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lille (Q)	6	4	2	0	10	2	14
Slovan*	6	3	1	2	8	7	10
Olimpija	6	2	0	4	4	9	6
KI Klaksvik	6	1	1	4	5	9	4

*Advance to knockout round play-offs

Group B

Dec 14 – Backa Topola
Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 3 (Kanichowsky 9, Zahavi 24, 61)
Gent (Bel) 1 (De Sart 49)

Dec 14 – Lublin
Zorya Luhansk (Ukr) 4 (Guerrero 2, Muminovic 11 og, Micin 19, Horbach 76)
Breidablik (Isl) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Maccabi Tel Aviv (Q)	6	5	0	1	14	9	15
Gent*	6	4	1	1	16	7	13
Zorya Luhansk	6	2	1	3	10	11	7
Breidablik	6	0	0	6	5	18	0

*Advance to knockout round play-offs

Group C

Dec 14 – Plzen
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 3 (Vlkanova 58, Mosquera 67, 82)
Astana (Kaz) 0

Dec 14 – Zagreb
Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 3 (Peric 69, Petkovic 72, 77 pen)
Ballkani (Kos) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Viktoria Plzen (Q)	6	6	0	0	9	1	18
Dinamo Zagreb*	6	3	0	3	10	5	9
Astana	6	1	1	4	4	13	4
Ballkani	6	1	1	4	3	7	4

*Advance to knockout round play-offs

Group D

Dec 14 – Brugge
Club Brugge (Bel) 3 (Nusa 26, Igor Thiago 58, Mechele 89)
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 1 (Pellegrino 57 pen)

Dec 14 – Zurich
Lugano (Sui) 0
Besiktas (Tur) 2 (Tosun 36, Terzi 88)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Club Brugge (Q)	6	5	1	0	15	3	16
Bodo/Glimt*	6	3	1	2	11	8	10
Besiktas	6	1	1	4	7	14	4
Lugano	6	1	1	4	6	14	4

*Advance to knockout round play-offs

Group E

Dec 14 – Warsaw
Legia Warsaw (Pol) 2 (Ribeiro 34, Kramer 81)
AZ (Ned) 0

Dec 14 – Mostar
Zrinjski Mostar (Bih) 1 (Malekinusic 87)
Aston Villa (Eng) 1 (Zaniolo 61)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Aston Villa (Q)	6	4	1	1	12	7	13
Legia Warsaw*	6	4	0	2	10	6	12
AZ	6	2	0	4	7	12	6
Zrinjski Mostar	6	1	1	4	6	10	4

*Advance to knockout round play-offs

Group F

Dec 14 – Genk
Genk (Bel) 2 (Heynen 21, Paintsil 57)
Cukaricki (Srb) 0

Dec 14 – Budapest
Ferencvaros (Hun) 1 (Zachariassen 48)
Fiorentina (Ita) 1 (Ranieri 73)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Fiorentina (Q)	6	3	3	0	14	6	12
Ferencvaros*	6	2	4	0	9	6	10
Genk	6	2	3	1	8	5	9
Cukaricki	6	0	0	6	2	16	0

*Advance to knockout round play-offs

Group G

Dec 14 – Thessaloniki
PAOK (Gre) 4 (Ozdoyev 37, Konstantelias 47, Toivio 53 og, Murg 85)
HJK (Fin) 2 (Radulovic 6, Hetemaj 90+2 pen)

Dec 14 – Aberdeen
Aberdeen (Sco) 2 (Duk 41, Sokler 74)
Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
PAOK (Q)	6	5	1	0	16	10	16
E. Frankfurt*	6	3	0	3	11	7	9
Aberdeen	6	1	3	2	10	10	6
HJK	6	0	2	4	7	17	2

*Advance to knockout round play-offs

Group H

Dec 14 – Razgrad
Ludogorets (Bul) 1 (Piotrowski 79)
Nordsjaelland (Den) 0

Dec 14 – Istanbul
Fenerbahce (Tur) 4 (Kadioglu 36, Takac 48 og, Dzeko 59, 61)
Spartak Trnava (Svk) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Fenerbahce (Q)	6	4	0	2	13	11	12
Ludogorets*	6	4	0	2	11	11	12
Nordsjaelland	6	3	1	2	17	7	10
Spartak Trnava	6	0	1	5	3	15	1

*Advance to knockout round play-offs

SOUTH AMERICA

ARGENTINA

Copa de la Liga Profesional Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Huracan*	14	8	2	4	19	11	26
River Plate*	14	7	3	4	24	16	24
Banfield*	14	6	5	3	11	6	23
Rosario Central* (C)	14	6	5	3	17	13	23
Independiente	14	6	5	3	15	11	23
Velez Sarsfield	14	6	4	4	17	14	22
Instituto	14	4	8	2	11	7	20
Colon	14	6	2	6	19	17	20
Talleres de Cordoba	14	4	5	5	15	15	17
Atletico Tucuman	14	4	5	5	9	12	17
Gimnasia y Esgrima	14	4	3	7	13	21	15
Argentinos Juniors	14	3	5	6	19	23	14
Barracas Central	14	3	5	6	10	21	14
Arsenal	14	3	4	7	10	15	13

*Advance to finals stage

Copa de la Liga Profesional Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Racing Club*	14	6	6	2	22	16	24
Godoy Cruz*	14	5	7	2	14	9	22
Belgrano*	14	5	6	3	20	18	21
Platense*	14	5	5	4	13	16	20
Central Cordoba	14	5	4	5	11	14	19
Newell's Old Boys	14	5	3	6	14	10	18
Boca Juniors	14	5	3	6	17	16	18
San Lorenzo	14	3	9	2	11	11	18
Estudiantes	14	4	5	5	11	13	17
Sarmiento	14	3	7	4	8	8	16
Union	14	3	7	4	10	13	16
Defensa y Justicia	14	3	5	6	12	16	14
Tigre	14	3	4	7	8	13	13
Lanus	14	2	6	6	9	14	12

*Advance to finals stage

Quarter-Finals

Dec 2 – Pocito
Huracan 1 (Mazzantti 41)
Platense 1 (Ferreyra 87)
Platense win 4-2 on penalties

Dec 2 – Villa Mercedes
Godoy Cruz 0
Banfield 0
Godoy Cruz win 5-3 on penalties

Dec 3 – Salta
Racing Club 2 (Martinez 80, Quintero 90+7 pen)
Rosario Central 2 (Campaz 45+6 pen, Sandez 60)
Rosario Central win 7-6 on penalties

Dec 3 – Cordoba
River Plate 2 (Rondon 61, Colidio 90+3)
Belgrano 1 (Passerini 80)

Semi-Finals

Dec 9 – San Nicolas de los Arroyos
Godoy Cruz 1 (S. Rodriguez 28)
Platense 1 (Martinez 17)
Platense win 6-5 on penalties

Dec 9 – Cordoba
River Plate 0
Rosario Central 0
Rosario Central win 2-0 on penalties

Final

Dec 16 – Santiago del Estero
Rosario Central 1 (Lovera 39)
Platense 0

Aggregate Table (Primera Divison & Copa DLLP)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
River Plate (C)	41	26	7	8	74	36	85
Talleres	41	18	13	10	57	38	67
Rosario Central (C)	41	16	17	8	53	42	65
San Lorenzo	41	15	19	7	34	24	64
Godoy Cruz	41	16	15	10	51	41	63
Boca Juniors	41	18	8	15	50	40	62
Estudiantes	41	16	14	11	46	37	62
Racing Club	41	15	15	11	58	51	60
Defensa y Justicia	41	15	13	13	48	39	58
Lanus	41	14	15	12	47	41	57
Belgrano	41	15	12	14	40	44	57
Argentinos Juniors	41	14	12	15	50	45	54
Atletico Tucuman	41	13	15	13	34	39	54
Platense	41	14	12	15	39	45	54
Newell's Old Boys	41	13	14	14	38	34	53
Banfield	41	13	14	14	32	38	53
Instituto	41	12	16	13	35	42	52
Huracan	41	14	9	18	37	40	51
Independiente	41	12	15	14	38	43	51
Velez Sarsfield	41	11	16	14	41	41	49
Barracas Central	41	11	16	14	35	51	49
Central Cordoba	41	12	12	17	31	44	48
Tigre	41	12	11	18	35	42	47
Sarmiento	41	10	16	15	31	34	46
Union	41	9	19	13	29	38	46
Gimnasia y Esgrima*	41	11	12	18	37	59	45
Colon* (R)	41	10	15	16	39	50	45
Arsenal (R)	41	9	8	24	28	49	35

*Enter relegation play-off

Relegation Play-Off

Dec 1: Gimnasia y Esgrima 1-0 Colon

BOLIVIA

Primera Division

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
The Strongest (C)	32	19	8	5	65	34	65
Bolivar	32	17	6	9	84	42	57
Always Ready	32	16	9	7	54	36	57
Nacional Potosi	32	16	6	10	72	46	54
Aurora	32	14	9	9	45	31	51
Real Tomayapo	32	13	10	9	36	34	49
Real Santa Cruz	32	13	7	12	31	42	46
Jorge Wilstermann*	32	12	13	7	39	27	43
Oriente Petrolero	32	11	10	11	44	42	43
Universitario de Vinto	32	9	14	9	30	28	41
Independiente Petrolero	32	13	1	18	33	45	40
Royal Pari	32	8	11	13	40	53	35
Guabira	32	10	5	17	34	49	35
Blooming	32	9	6	17	37	56	33
Libertad Gran Mamore	32	9	6	17	32	65	33
Vaca Diez	32	8	8	16	42	61	32
Palmaflor	32	8	5	19	32	59	29

*Deducted 6 points

Copa de la Division Profesional Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bolivar* (C)	10	8	0	2	24	7	24
Jorge Wilstermann*	10	5	2	3	20	11	17
Royal Pari*	10	4	1	5	14	15	13
Libertad Gran Mamore	10	4	1	5	10	17	13
Real Tomayapo	10	3	3	4	7	13	12
Oriente Petrolero	10	1	3	6	7	19	6

*Advance to finals stage

Copa de la Division Profesional Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Aurora*	8	3	4	1	5	4	13
The Strongest*	8	3	3	2	10	6	12
Guabira	8	3	2	3	9	7	11
Palmaflor	8	2	4	2	5	5	10
Real Santa Cruz	8	1	3	4	4	11	6

*Advance to finals stage

Copa de la Division Profesional Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Blooming*	10	7	1	2	16	8	22
Always Ready*	10	4	3	3	20	17	15
Universitario de Vinto*	10	4	3	3	17	17	15
Nacional Potosi	10	3	3	4	20	17	12
Vaca Diez	10	4	0	6	14	21	12
Independiente Petrolero	10	2	2	6	10	17	8

*Advance to finals stage

Quarter-Finals

Nov 28-29: Universitario de Vinto 1-1 Bolivar; Always Ready 0-1 Aurora; Royal Pari 0-0 Blooming; Jorge Wilstermann 1-2 The Strongest
Dec 9-10: Bolivar 2-2 Universitario de Vinto (agg 3-3, 3-2p); Aurora 4-1 Always Ready (agg 5-1); The Strongest 0-2 Jorge Wilstermann (agg 2-3); Blooming 1-2 Royal Pari (agg 1-2)

Semi-Finals

Dec 11-12: Bolivar 3-1 Aurora; Jorge Wilstermann 2-0 Royal Pari
Dec 14: Aurora 1-0 Bolivar (agg 2-3); Royal Pari 2-1 Jorge Wilstermann (agg 2-3)

Final

Dec 16: Jorge Wilstermann 1-2 Bolivar
Dec 18: Bolivar 1-0 Jorge Wilstermann (agg 3-1)

Aggregate Table (Primera Divison & Copa DLDP)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Avg Pts
Bolivar (C)	42	25	6	11	108	49	1.928571
The Strongest (C)	40	22	11	7	75	40	1.925
Always Ready	42	20	12	10	74	53	1.714286
Aurora	40	17	13	10	50	35	1.6
Nacional Potosi	42	19	9	14	92	63	1.571429
Real Tomayapo	42	16	13	13	44	48	1.452381
Jorge Wilstermann*	42	17	15	10	59	38	1.428571
Universitario de Vinto	42	13	17	12	47	45	1.333333
Blooming	42	16	7	19	53	64	1.309524
Real Santa Cruz	40	14	10	16	35	53	1.3
Oriente Petrolero	42	12	13	17	51	61	1.166667
Guabira	40	13	7	20	43	56	1.15
Royal Pari	42	12	12	18	54	68	1.142857
Independiente Petrolero	42	15	3	24	43	62	1.142857
Libertad Gran Mamore** (R)	42	13	7	22	42	82	1.095238
Vaca Diez (R)	42	12	8	22	56	82	1.047619
Palmaflor (R)	40	10	9	21	37	64	0.975

*Deducted 6 points
**Enter relegation play-off

Relegation Play-Off

Dec 13: San Antonio Bulo Bulo 2-0 Libertad Gran Mamore
Dec 16: Libertad Gran Mamore 2-0 San Antonio Bulo Bulo (agg 2-2, 2-4p)

BRAZIL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Palmeiras (C)	38	20	10	8	64	33	70
Gremio	38	21	5	12	63	56	68
Atletico Mineiro	38	19	9	10	52	32	66
Flamengo	38	19	9	10	56	42	66
Botafogo	38	18	10	10	58	37	64
RB Bragantino	38	17	11	10	49	35	62
Fluminense	38	16	8	14	51	47	56
Athletico Paranaense	38	14	14	10	51	43	56
Internacional	38	15	10	13	46	45	55
Fortaleza	38	15	9	14	45	44	54
Sao Paulo	38	14	11	13	40	38	53
Cuiaba	38	14	9	15	40	39	51
Corinthians	38	12	14	12	47	48	50
Cruzeiro	38	11	14	13	35	32	47
Vasco da Gama	38	12	9	17	41	51	45
Bahia	38	12	8	18	50	53	44
Santos (R)	38	11	10	17	39	64	43
Goias (R)	38	9	11	18	36	53	38
Coritiba (R)	38	8	6	24	41	73	30
America Mineiro (R)	38	5	9	24	42	81	24

CHILE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Huachipato (C)	30	17	6	7	48	30	57
Cobresal	30	16	8	6	56	39	56
Colo Colo	30	15	9	6	45	29	54
Palestino	30	14	7	9	46	40	49
Coquimbo Unido	30	14	5	11	43	42	47
Everton	30	13	6	11	42	39	45
Universidad Catolica	30	11	9	10	48	43	42
Union La Calera	30	10	11	9	42	41	41
Universidad de Chile	30	11	7	12	40	42	40
Union Espanola	30	10	9	11	40	36	39
O'Higgins	30	9	8	13	37	39	35
Nublense	30	9	8	13	33	39	35
Audax Italiano	30	10	5	15	36	43	35
Deportes Copiapo	30	8	10	12	32	45	34
Magallanes (R)	30	8	5	17	36	49	29
Curico Unido (R)	30	6	5	19	30	58	23

COLOMBIA

Torneo Finalizacion

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Aguilas Doradas*	20	12	8	0	35	12	44
Independiente Medellin*	20	10	9	1	30	15	39
America de Cali*	20	10	7	3	35	19	37
Tolima*	20	11	4	5	23	17	37
Atletico Nacional*	20	10	3	7	33	21	33
Junior* (C)	20	8	6	6	29	17	30
Millonarios*	20	8	6	6	21	20	30
Deportivo Cali*	20	7	7	6	25	25	28
Alianza Petrolera	20	8	4	8	18	24	28
La Equidad	20	5	11	4	19	20	26
Atletico Bucaramanga	20	7	5	8	20	22	26
Deportivo Pasto	20	6	7	7	16	20	25
Santa Fe	20	6	6	8	21	29	24
Once Caldas	20	5	7	8	21	22	22
Union Magdalena	20	5	7	8	21	32	22
Atletico Huila	20	4	7	9	18	22	19
Deportivo Pereira	20	5	4	11	19	28	19
Boyaca Chico	20	3	10	7	15	26	19
Jaguares	20	3	5	12	7	21	14
Envigado	20	2	7	11	18	32	13

*Advance to next stage

Semi-Final Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Junior* (C)	6	4	1	1	14	7	13
Tolima	6	4	0	2	15	8	12
Aguilas Doradas	6	2	2	2	7	10	8
Deportivo Cali	6	0	1	5	4	15	1

*Advance to final

Semi-Final Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Independiente Medellin*	6	5	0	1	13	5	15
Millonarios	6	3	0	3	5	5	9
Atletico Nacional	6	3	0	3	4	8	9
America de Cali	6	1	0	5	4	8	3

*Advance to final

Final

Dec 10: Junior 3-2 Independiente Medellin
Dec 13: Independiente Medellin 2-1 Junior (agg 4-4) (3-5p)

Aggregate Table (Apertura & Finalizacion)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Aguilas Doradas	52	25	18	9	78	54	93
Millonarios (C)	54	25	17	12	66	50	92
Atletico Nacional	54	25	16	13	71	48	91
Independiente Medellin	54	24	16	14	79	56	88
America de Cali	52	23	13	16	79	56	82
Junior (C)	48	20	14	14	64	45	74
Tolima	46	20	13	13	61	51	73
Alianza Petrolera	46	19	11	16	53	51	68
Deportivo Pasto	46	15	15	16	44	46	60
Boyaca Chico	46	12	21	13	45	50	57
La Equidad	40	10	22	8	39	37	52
Deportivo Cali	46	12	16	18	49	66	52
Santa Fe	40	13	11	16	50	54	50
Atletico Bucaramanga	40	11	13	16	35	43	46
Deportivo Pereira	40	11	11	18	43	53	44
Once Caldas	40	9	15	16	38	46	42
Union Magdalena	40	8	17	15	37	62	41
Atletico Huila	40	9	10	21	38	57	37
Envigado	40	6	15	19	32	52	33
Jaguares	40	7	12	21	23	47	33

Relegation Table (Apertura & Finalizacion)

	2021	2022	2023	GD*	P	Pts	Avg Pts
Millonarios	69	74	68	+13	118	211	1.79
Atletico Nacional	76	66	68	+24	118	210	1.78
Deportes Tolima	66	66	61	+3	118	193	1.64
Independiente Medellin	52	67	68	+20	118	189	1.6
Junior	62	63	58	+12	118	183	1.55
America de Cali	58	54	69	+25	118	181	1.53
Aguilas Doradas	39	58	83	+34	118	180	1.53
Santa Fe	58	61	50	-4	118	169	1.43
La Equidad	55	58	52	+2	118	165	1.4
Atletico Bucaramanga	51	59	46	-8	118	156	1.32
Deportivo Pereira	51	55	44	-10	118	150	1.27
Deportivo Pasto	39	54	54	-3	118	147	1.25
Deportivo Cali	62	34	51	-6	118	147	1.25
Boyaca Chico	—	—	49	-5	40	49	1.23
Alianza Petrolera	37	46	58	-1	118	141	1.19
Once Caldas	37	56	42	-8	118	135	1.14
Envigado	44	57	33	-20	118	134	1.14
Jaguares	52	47	33	-24	118	132	1.12
Union Magdalena** (R)	—	40	41	-25	80	81	1.01
Atletico Huila** (R)	—	—	37	-19	40	37	0.93

*Goal difference for 2023 season only
**Relegated on points coefficient during current season and two previous seasons (2021 & 2022)

ECUADOR

Second Stage

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
LDU*	15	11	3	1	21	4	36
Barcelona SC	15	9	5	1	24	15	32
Aucas	15	6	7	2	22	15	25
Delfin	15	5	9	1	19	12	24
El Nacional	15	5	8	2	25	19	23
Emelec	15	5	7	3	14	8	22
Universidad Catolica	15	5	7	3	15	12	22
Independiente Del Valle	15	6	3	6	18	15	21
Tecnico Universitario	15	4	7	4	20	17	19
Mushuc Runa	15	5	4	6	14	19	19
Orense	15	4	4	7	15	15	16
Deportivo Cuenca	15	3	7	5	12	16	16
Libertad	15	4	3	8	12	18	15
Guayaquil City	15	2	4	9	5	18	10
Cumbaya	15	1	6	8	14	26	9
Gualaceo	15	1	4	10	9	30	7

*Advance to final to take on first stage winners

Final

Dec 10: Independiente del Valle 0-0 LDU
Dec 17: LDU 1-1 Ind del Valle (agg 1-1) (3-0p)

Aggregate Table (First & Second Stage)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
LDU (C)	30	18	8	4	50	21	62
Barcelona SC	30	17	7	6	54	35	58
Independiente del Valle	30	17	4	9	49	30	55
El Nacional	30	15	8	7	57	44	53
Aucas	30	13	10	7	39	34	49
Delfin	30	12	12	6	37	35	48
Universidad Catolica	30	12	10	8	37	37	46
Tecnico Universitario	30	9	10	11	41	32	37
Deportivo Cuenca	30	10	7	13	36	37	37
Orense	30	10	7	13	32	36	37
Emelec	30	8	12	10	32	28	36
Mushuc Runa	30	8	8	14	28	44	32
Libertad	30	6	10	14	32	44	28
Cumbaya	30	5	11	14	24	39	26
Gualaceo (R)	30	6	7	17	26	53	25
Guayaquil City (R)	30	5	7	18	22	47	22

PARAGUAY

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Libertad (C)	22	14	6	2	45	14	48
Cerro Porteno	22	10	10	2	41	21	40
Nacional	22	8	8	6	33	23	32
Guarani	22	9	5	8	20	29	32
Olimpia	22	8	7	7	28	26	31
Tacuary	22	7	8	7	24	29	29
Sportivo Trinidense	22	7	6	9	34	35	27
Sportivo Ameliano	22	8	3	11	32	34	27
General Caballero (JLM)	22	6	7	9	18	24	25
Sportivo Luqueno	22	6	6	10	24	28	24
Guairena	22	6	6	10	29	41	24
Resistencia	22	5	4	13	20	44	19

Aggregate Table (Apertura & Clausura)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Libertad (C)	44	30	9	5	84	29	99
Cerro Porteno	44	21	18	5	81	50	81
Sportivo Trinidense	44	18	11	15	68	56	65
Nacional	44	17	14	13	56	44	65
Guarani	44	17	14	13	49	53	65
Olimpia	44	16	14	14	60	52	62
Sportivo Ameliano	44	15	12	17	59	62	57
Sportivo Luqueno	44	12	15	17	51	56	51
General Caballero (JLM)	44	12	13	19	39	52	49
Tacuary	44	11	11	22	40	60	44
Guairena	44	9	14	21	44	72	41
Resistencia	44	9	9	26	34	79	36

Relegation Table (Apertura & Clausura)

	2021	2022	2023	P	Pts	Avg Pts
Libertad	65	91	99	124	255	2.056
Cerro Porteno	66	98	81	124	245	1.976
Olimpia	51	92	62	124	205	1.653
Nacional	50	71	65	124	186	1.5
Sportivo Trinidense	—	—	65	44	65	1.477
Guarani	61	55	65	124	181	1.46
Sportivo Ameliano	—	48	57	88	105	1.193
Sportivo Luqueno	—	—	51	44	51	1.159
General Caballero (JLM)	—	51	49	88	100	1.136
Tacuary	—	53	44	88	97	1.102
Guairena* (R)	44	50	41	124	135	1.089
Resistencia* (R)	—	49	36	88	85	0.966

*Relegated on points coefficient during current season and two previous seasons (2021& 2022)

PERU

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Universitario*	18	11	6	1	28	8	39
Melgar	18	11	5	2	31	13	38
Alianza Lima	18	10	7	1	18	6	37
Sporting Cristal	18	10	6	2	31	13	36
ADT	18	9	7	2	21	13	34
Sport Huancayo	18	8	5	5	22	14	29
Deportivo Garcilaso**	18	7	6	5	24	20	26
Universidad Cesar Vallejo	18	7	3	8	25	19	24
Cienciano	18	6	6	6	21	20	24
Sport Boys	18	6	5	7	15	23	23
Carlos A. Mannucci	18	5	5	8	16	22	20
UTC	18	3	10	5	21	23	19
Cusco	18	4	6	8	18	23	18
Atletico Grau	18	4	6	8	17	27	18
Binacional	18	5	2	11	25	34	17
Union Comercio	18	4	5	9	18	32	17
Academia Cantolao	18	5	2	11	12	26	17
Alianza Atletico	18	4	4	10	14	25	16
Deportivo Municipal	18	4	0	14	17	33	12

*Advance to final to take on Apertura winners
**Deducted 1 point

Final

Nov 4: Universitario 1-1 Alianza Lima
Nov 8: Alianza Lima 0-2 Universitario (agg 1-3)

Aggregate Table (Apertura & Clausura)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Alianza Lima	36	24	7	5	55	22	79
Universitario (C)	36	22	7	7	57	22	73
Sporting Cristal	36	19	14	3	64	31	71
Melgar	36	17	12	7	55	35	63
Sport Huancayo	36	16	8	12	52	39	56
ADT	36	14	13	9	44	36	55
Deportivo Garcilaso*	36	13	13	10	56	47	51
Universidad Cesar Vallejo	36	14	9	13	50	42	51
Cusco	36	14	8	14	42	45	50
Cienciano	36	13	9	14	44	48	48
Carlos A. Mannucci	36	13	8	15	33	40	47
Atletico Grau	36	10	11	15	48	48	41
UTC	36	8	16	12	37	45	40
Alianza Atletico	36	10	9	17	46	58	39
Sport Boys**	36	11	8	17	28	49	37
Union Comercio	36	9	9	18	42	72	36
Binacional (R)	36	10	5	21	53	68	35
Deportivo Municipal*** (R)	36	11	3	22	36	54	31
Academia Cantolao (R)	36	7	5	24	21	62	26

*Deducted 1 point
**Deducted 4 points
***Deducted 5 points

URUGUAY

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Liverpool*	15	11	2	2	23	8	35
Penarol	15	6	7	2	19	13	25
Racing	15	7	4	4	16	13	25
Nacional	15	6	6	3	20	17	24
Danubio	15	6	4	5	15	14	22
Defensor Sporting	15	6	3	6	19	13	21
Montevideo City Torque	15	6	3	6	21	20	21
Boston River	15	6	2	7	17	16	20
Plaza Colonia	15	4	7	4	13	15	19
River Plate	15	5	4	6	9	14	19
Deportivo Maldonado	15	5	3	7	14	19	18
Cerro Largo	15	4	5	6	14	17	17
Fenix	15	3	7	5	11	15	16
Cerro	15	3	6	6	12	15	15
Montevideo Wanderers	15	4	3	8	13	21	15
La Luz	15	3	4	8	13	19	13

*Advance to semi-final along with Apertura winners

Semi-Final

Dec 9: Liverpool 0-1 Penarol* (*AET*)
*Penarol advance to final

Aggregate Table (Apertura, Intermedio & Clausura)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Liverpool* (C)	37	22	8	7	62	35	74
Penarol	37	19	12	6	53	33	69
Nacional	37	17	13	7	60	36	64
Defensor Sporting	37	16	12	9	56	31	60
Montevideo Wanderers	37	13	11	13	39	39	50
Racing	37	13	11	13	41	42	50
Cerro Largo	37	12	14	11	35	36	50
Danubio	37	12	12	13	41	37	48
River Plate	37	12	12	13	31	40	48
Montevideo City Torque**	37	11	10	16	44	52	45
Cerro	37	9	16	12	30	34	43
Deportivo Maldonado	37	11	10	16	39	55	43
Boston River	37	11	8	18	40	46	41
Plaza Colonia	37	8	15	14	37	57	39
Fenix	37	8	13	16	29	43	37
La Luz***	37	9	9	19	42	63	35

*Advance to final along with semi-final winners
**Awarded 2 points
***Deducted 1 point

Final

Dec 13: Liverpool 2-0 Penarol
Dec 16: Penarol 0-1 Liverpool (agg 0-3)

Relegation Table

	2022	2023	P	Pts	Avg Pts
Liverpool	74	72	74	146	1.973
Nacional	81	64	74	145	1.959
Penarol	59	69	74	128	1.73
Defensor Sporting	58	60	74	118	1.595
River Plate	60	48	74	108	1.459
Deportivo Maldonado	63	43	74	106	1.432
Danubio	56	48	74	104	1.405
Boston River	62	41	74	103	1.392
Montevideo Wanderers	51	50	74	101	1.365
Racing	—	50	37	50	1.351
Cerro Largo	40	50	74	90	1.216
Cerro	—	43	37	43	1.162
Fenix	49	37	74	86	1.162
Montevideo City Torque* (R)	36	45	74	81	1.095
Plaza Colonia* (R)	35	39	74	74	1
La Luz* (R)	—	35	37	35	0.946

*Relegated on points coefficient during current season and last season (2022)

VENEZUELA

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Deportivo Tachira* (C)	28	19	7	2	47	17	64
Academia Puerto Cabello*	28	19	3	6	49	19	60
Portuguesa*	28	13	7	8	32	26	46
Caracas*	28	10	15	3	44	27	45
Carabobo	28	11	12	5	35	21	45
Deportivo La Guiara	28	9	12	7	37	33	39
Metropolitanos	28	11	6	11	37	37	39
Deportivo Rayo Zuliano	28	8	12	8	33	39	36
Estudiantes de Merida	28	9	6	13	39	41	33
Angostura	28	8	6	14	32	41	30
Monagas	28	8	6	14	29	41	30
Zamora	28	8	6	14	31	50	30
Universidad Central	28	6	9	13	27	36	27
Hermanos Colmenarez	28	5	9	14	25	37	24
Mineros de Guayana (R)	28	4	8	16	25	57	20

*Advance to next stage

Play-Off

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Deportivo Tachira* (C)	6	3	3	0	8	3	12
Caracas*	6	2	3	1	5	4	9
Portuguesa	6	1	3	2	6	9	6
Academia Puerto Cabello	6	0	3	3	3	6	3

*Advance to final

Final

Nov 25:
Deportivo Tachira 1-1 Caracas (*AET*) (4-1p)

CONCACAF

BELIZE

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Verdes*	14	8	5	1	36	14	29
Port Layola*	14	8	3	3	39	23	27
Progresso*	14	7	3	4	29	19	24
Altitude* (C)	14	6	5	3	28	15	23
Benque	14	6	4	4	24	14	22
Police United	14	4	4	6	17	23	16
Internacional Belmopan	14	2	2	10	10	35	8
Wagiya	14	1	2	11	21	61	5

*Advance to finals stage

Semi-Finals

Dec 3: Progresso 1-2 Port Layola; Altitude 1-0 Verdes
Dec 10: Port Layola 0-1 Progresso (agg a2-2); Verdes 0-1 Altitude (agg 0-2)

Final

Dec 17: Altitude 0-0 Port Layola
Dec 24: Port Layola 0-2 Altitude (agg 0-2)

COSTA RICA

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Saprissa* (C)	22	18	1	3	53	19	55
Alajuelense*	22	14	4	4	42	23	46
Herediano*	22	13	4	5	43	20	43
Cartagines*	22	11	4	7	36	28	37
Guanacasteca	22	11	4	7	28	25	37
San Carlos	22	7	5	10	26	28	26
Sporting San Jose	22	7	5	10	26	35	26
Santos de Guapiles	22	5	8	9	17	26	23
Municipal Liberia	22	5	7	10	36	43	22
Puntarenas	22	6	3	13	26	34	21
Perez Zeledon	22	4	5	13	17	46	17
Municipal Grecia	22	3	6	13	19	42	15

*Advance to finals stage

Semi-Finals

Dec 3: Herediano 3-0 Alajuelense; Cartagines 0-2 Saprissa
Dec 10: Alajuelense 1-0 Herediano (agg 1-3); Saprissa 4-0 Cartagines (agg 6-0)

Final

Dec 14: Herediano 1-2 Saprissa
Dec 17: Saprissa 1-0 Herediano (agg 3-1)

EL SALVADOR

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Aguila* (C)	22	13	5	4	39	22	44
FAS*	22	12	6	4	36	23	42
Firpo*	22	10	7	5	36	26	37
Fuerte San Francisco*	22	10	4	8	27	24	34
Alianza*	22	7	11	4	28	20	32
Jocoro*	22	9	5	8	29	28	32
Dragon*	22	8	6	8	40	39	30
Isidro Metapan*	22	7	8	7	30	28	29
Municipal Limeno	22	8	4	10	29	33	28
Once Deportivo	22	7	6	9	26	30	27
Platense	22	2	6	14	19	44	12
Santa Tecla	22	1	8	13	20	42	11

*Advance to finals stage

Quarter-Finals
Nov 29-Dec 1: Dragon 1-1 FAS; Alianza 4-0 Fuerte San Francisco; Jocoro 1-0 Firpo; Isidro Metapan 0-0 Aguila
Dec 2-3: Fuerte San Francisco 1-1 Alianza (agg 1-5); FAS 0-1 Dragon (agg 1-2); Firpo 1-1 Jocoro (agg 1-2); Aguila 1-0 Isidro Metapan (agg 1-0)

Semi-Finals
Dec 10: Dragon 1-3 Jocoro; Alianza 1-1 Aguila
Dec 16-17: Jocoro 3-1 Dragon (agg 6-2); Aguila 2-1 Alianza (agg 3-2)

Final
Dec 23: Aguila 3-0 Jocoro

GUATEMALA
Apertura Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Comunicaciones* (C)	16	7	5	4	27	20	26
Malacateco*	16	7	3	6	24	24	24
Xelaju*	16	5	4	7	10	13	19
Coban Imperial	16	4	6	6	19	25	18
Xinabajul	16	3	7	6	18	25	16
Coatepeque	16	2	5	9	12	24	11

*Advance to finals stage

Apertura Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Achuapa*	16	9	3	4	27	23	30
Municipal*	16	8	4	4	27	17	28
Antigua GFC*	16	8	4	4	24	19	28
Guastatoya*	16	7	2	7	21	16	23
Deportivo Zacapa*	16	7	1	8	22	20	22
Mixco	16	5	4	7	15	20	19

*Advance to finals stage

Quarter-Finals
Nov 29-Dec 1: Guastatoya 2-0 Antigua GFC; Malacateco 2-0 Comunicaciones; Deportivo Zacapa 1-0 Municipal; Xelaju 3-1 Achuapa
Dec 2-3: Comunicaciones 5-0 Malacateco (agg 5-2); Antigua GFC 0-0 Guastatoya (agg 0-2); Municipal 1-2 Deportivo Zacapa (agg 1-3); Achuapa 1-3 Xelaju (agg 2-6)

Semi-Finals
Dec 7-8: Deportivo Zacapa 1-1 Guastatoya; Xelaju 2-2 Comunicaciones
Dec 9-11: Guastatoya 3-1 Deportivo Zacapa (agg 4-2); Comunicaciones 0-0 Xelaju (agg a2-2)

Final
Dec 17: Guastatoya 1-1 Comunicaciones
Dec 23: Comunicaciones 1-0 Guastatoya (agg 2-1)

HONDURAS
Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Olimpia* (C)	18	15	3	0	48	14	48
Marathon*	18	10	2	6	23	21	32
Motagua**	18	8	5	5	32	22	29
Genesis**	18	6	5	7	23	24	23
Real Sociedad**	18	5	7	6	17	19	22
Olancho**	18	5	6	7	16	19	21
Real Espana	18	6	3	9	26	32	21
Vida	18	5	5	8	26	35	20
Victoria	18	4	5	9	23	30	17
UPNFM	18	4	3	11	20	38	15

*Advance to finals stage semi-finals
**Advance to finals stage play-offs

Play-Offs
Nov 30-Dec 1: Real Sociedad 0-0 Genesis; Olancho 2-2 Motagua
Dec 3-4: Genesis 3-2 Real Sociedad (agg 3-2); Motagua 1-1 Olancho (agg a3-3)

Semi-Finals
Dec 7-8:
Motagua 2-1 Marathon; Genesis 0-1 Olimpia
Dec 9-10: Marathon 2-2 Motagua (agg 3-4); Olimpia 2-0 Genesis (agg 3-0)

Final
Dec 17: Motagua 0-0 Olimpia
Dec 21: Olimpia 2-1 Motagua (agg 2-1)

MEXICO
Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
America* (C)	17	12	4	1	37	14	40
Monterrey*	17	10	3	4	27	15	33
Tigres UANL*	17	8	6	3	32	18	30
Pumas UNAM*	17	8	4	5	27	18	28
Guadalajara*	17	8	3	6	22	22	27
Puebla*	17	7	4	6	24	25	25
Atletico San Luis**	17	7	2	8	31	26	23
Leon**	17	6	5	6	23	22	23
Santos Laguna**	17	7	2	8	31	34	23
Mazatlan**	17	6	4	7	25	27	22
Pachuca	17	5	7	5	16	27	22
Toluca	17	5	6	6	23	19	21
Tijuana	17	6	2	9	23	26	20
Queretaro	17	5	4	8	18	29	19
Juarez	17	5	3	9	24	34	18
Cruz Azul	17	5	2	10	21	29	17
Atlas	17	4	5	8	14	24	17
Necaxa	17	3	6	8	18	27	15

*Advance to finals stage quarter-finals
**Advance to finals stage play-in round

Play-In Round

Nov 23 – San Luis Potosi
Atletico San Luis 3 (Tesillo 3 og, Damm 26, Salles-Lamonge 74)
Leon 2 (Alvarado 10, Vinas 78)

Nov 23 – Torreon
Santos Laguna 2 (Brunetta 7, 70)
Mazatlan 1 (Flores 47)

Play-Off

Nov 26 – Leon
Leon 3 (Frias 21, Ambriz 43, Vinas 48)
Santos Laguna 2 (Cervantes 72, Preciado 83)

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Nov 29 – Leon
Leon 2 (Bellon 2, Lopez 39)
America 2 (Martin 6, 47)

Nov 30 – San Luis Potosi
Atletico San Luis 1 (Chavez 21)
Monterrey 0

Nov 30 – Puebla
Puebla 2 (Martinez 44, Olmedo 49)
Tigres UANL 2 (Cordova 38, Fulgencio 75)

Nov 30 – Zapopan
Guadalajara 1 (Beltran 43)
Pumas UNAM 0

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Dec 2 – Mexico City
America 2 (Quinones 61 pen, Martin 89)
Leon 0
America win 4-2 on aggregate

Dec 2 – Guadalupe
Monterrey 1 (Funes Mori 8)
Atletico San Luis 1 (Vitinho 49)
Atletico San Luis win 2-1 on aggregate

Dec 3 – San Nicolas de los Garza
Tigres UANL 3 (Gignac 9 pen, 33, Ibanez 72)
Puebla 0
Tigres UANL win 5-2 on aggregate

Dec 3 – Mexico City
Pumas UNAM 3 (Briseno 14 og, Huerta 18 pen, Fernandez 64)
Guadalajara 0
Pumas UNAM win 3-1 on aggregate

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Dec 6 – San Luis Potosi
Atletico San Luis 0
America 5 (Valdes 4, 65, Martin 14, Quinones 84, 90+5)

Dec 7 – Mexico City
Pumas UNAM 0
Tigres UANL 1 (Angulo 74)

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Dec 9 – Mexico City
America 0
Atletico San Luis 2 (Zaldivar 48, 87)
America win 5-2 on aggregate

Dec 10 – San Nicolas de los Garza
Tigres UANL 1 (Vigon 24)
Pumas UNAM 1 (Fernandez 16)
Tigres UANL win 2-1 on aggregate

Final – 1st Leg

Dec 14 – San Nicolas de los Garza
Tigres UANL 1 (Herrera 71)
America 1 (Martin 51 pen)

Final – 2nd Leg

Dec 17 – Mexico City
America 3 (Quinones 91, Sanchez 104, J. Rodriguez 120)
Tigres UANL 0
After Extra-time
America win 4-1 on aggregate

NICARAGUA
Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Real Esteli*	18	13	3	2	37	9	42
Diriangen* (C)	18	10	3	5	24	18	33
Sport Sebaco**	18	9	3	6	29	32	30
Managua**	18	6	7	5	33	26	25
UNAN Managua**	18	7	4	7	29	29	25
Municipal Jalapa**	18	5	7	6	22	25	22
Organica Masachapa	18	6	3	9	18	32	21
Matagalpa	18	4	5	9	23	27	17
Walter Ferretti	18	3	8	7	17	24	17
Deportivo Ocotal	18	4	3	11	21	31	1

*Advance to finals stage semi-finals
**Advance to finals stage play-offs

Play-Offs
Nov 29-30: Sport Sebaco 3-0 Municipal Jalapa (*AET*); Managua 4-1 UNAN Managua

Semi-Finals
Dec 3: Sport Sebaco 1-2 Diriangen
Dec 10: Diriangen 3-0 Sport Sebaco (agg 5-1)
Dec 11: Managua 0-1 Real Esteli
Dec 15: Real Esteli 0-0 Managua (agg 1-0)

Final
Dec 17: Diriangen 1-0 Real Esteli
Dec 22: Real Esteli 1-1 Diriangen (*AET*, agg 1-2)

PANAMA
Clausura East

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tauro*	16	9	5	2	28	14	32
Sporting San Miguelito**	16	8	4	4	24	11	28
Alianza**	16	6	6	4	17	17	24
Arabe Unido	16	6	5	5	16	16	23
Plaza Amador	16	5	4	7	22	17	19
Deportivo del Este	16	4	4	8	20	29	16

*Advance to finals stage semi-finals
**Advance to finals stage play-offs

Clausura West

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Independiente* (C)	16	11	4	1	39	16	37
San Francisco**	16	7	4	5	19	14	25
Herrera**	16	6	5	5	28	20	23
Universitario	16	5	6	5	15	19	21
UMECIT	16	3	2	11	18	25	11
Atletico Chiriqui	16	0	3	13	9	57	3

*Advance to finals stage semi-finals
**Advance to finals stage play-offs

Play-Offs
Nov 22-23: Sporting San Miguelito 2-0 Herrera; San Francisco 1-1 Alianza (*AET*) (4-5p)

Semi-Finals
Nov 25-26: Sporting San Miguelito 2-2 Independiente; Alianza 0-1 Tauro
Dec 2-3: Independiente 2-1 Sporting San Miguelito (agg 4-3); Tauro 2-1 Alianza (agg 3-1)

Final
Dec 9: Independiente 3-0 Tauro

Aggregate Table (Apertura & Clausura)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Independiente (C)	32	20	7	5	72	33	67
Sporting San Miguelito	32	15	10	7	43	24	55
Tauro	32	15	9	8	43	27	54
Herrera	32	13	11	8	52	33	50
San Francisco	32	10	13	9	30	31	43
Alianza	32	11	10	11	28	34	43
Universitario	32	11	10	11	33	41	43
Arabe Unido	32	10	12	10	30	28	42
Plaza Amador	32	11	8	13	41	34	41
Deportivo del Este	32	10	6	16	42	54	36
UMECIT	32	8	8	16	32	39	32
Atletico Chiriqui (R)	32	3	6	23	22	90	15

PUERTO RICO
Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Metropolitan*	7	7	0	0	34	6	21
Academia Quintana* (C)	7	6	0	1	36	9	18
Guayama**	7	4	1	2	18	25	13
PR Sol**	7	3	1	3	18	12	10
Bayamon**	7	3	0	4	17	14	9
Caguas Sporting**	7	1	2	4	15	21	5
Guaynabo Gol	7	1	0	6	5	40	3
Don Bosco	7	0	2	5	10	26	2

*Advance to finals stage semi-finals
**Advance to finals stage play-offs

Play-Offs
Nov 11-12: PR Sol 0-2 Bayamon; Guayama 3-4 Caguas Sporting

Semi-Finals
Nov 26-29: Metropolitan 3-2 Bayamon; Academia Quintana 7-1 Caguas Sporting

Final
Dec 2: Metropolitan 2-3 Academia Quintana (*AET*)

ASIA

2023-24 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

West Zone

Group A

Dec 5 – Tashkent
Pakhtakor (Uzb) 1 (Erkinov 16)
Al Fayha (KSA) 4 (Sakala 40, 90+4, Mandash 46, Onyekuru 85)

Dec 5 – Ashgabat
Ahal (Tkm) 1 (Tagayew 35)
Al Ain (UAE) 2 (Rahimi 13 pen, Atzili 32 pen)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Ain (Q)	6	5	0	1	17	9	15
Al Fayha (Q)	6	3	0	3	12	10	9
Pakhtakor	6	2	1	3	8	11	7
Ahal	6	1	1	4	6	13	4

Group B

Dec 4 – Amman
Al Faisaly (Jor) 2 (Bani Hani 90, Kamergi 90+8)
Sharjah (UAE) 1 (Firas 34)

Dec 4 – Doha
Al Sadd (Qat) 2 (Uribe 5, Bounedjah 90+4)
Nasaf Qarshi (Uzb) 2 (Jighauri 83, 90)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Nasaf Qarshi (Q)	6	3	2	1	10	6	11
Al Sadd	6	2	2	2	11	7	8
Sharjah	6	2	2	2	4	5	8
Al Faisaly	6	2	0	4	5	12	6

Group C

Dec 4 – Mecca
Al Ittihad (KSA) 2 (Al Amri 14, Jota 69)
Sepahan (Irn) 1 (Rezaeian 48)

Dec 4 – Erbil
Al Quwa Al Jawiya (Irq) 3 (Abdul-Amir 14, Atchou 15, Qasim 42)
AGMK (Uzb) 2 (Mirakhmadov 62, Boakye 90+4)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Ittihad (Q)	6	5	0	1	11	4	15
Sepahan (Q)	6	3	1	2	16	8	10
Al Quwa Al Jawiya	6	3	1	2	9	7	10
AGMK	6	0	0	6	5	22	0

Group D

Dec 4 – Riyadh
Al Hilal (KSA) 2 (Michael 4, S. Al Dawsari 54)
Nassaji Mazandaran (Irn) 1 (Rahmati 77)

Dec 4 – Pune
Mumbai City (Ind) 1 (El Khayati 15)
Navbahor (Uzb) 2 (Iskanderov 29, Djokic 45+3)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Hilal (Q)	6	5	1	0	16	2	16
Navbahor (Q)	6	4	1	1	11	6	13
Nassaji Mazandaran	6	2	0	4	7	10	6
Mumbai City	6	0	0	6	1	17	0

Group E

Dec 5 – Tehran
Persepolis (Irn) 1 (Zahedi 7)
Al Duhail (Qat) 2 (Muntari 9, Olunga 83)

Dec 5 – Dushanbe
Istiklol (Tjk) 1 (Dzhalilov 32)
Al Nassr (KSA) 1 (Ghareeb 50)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Nassr (Q)	6	4	2	0	13	7	14
Persepolis	6	2	2	2	5	5	8
Al Duhail	6	2	1	3	9	9	7
Istiklol	6	0	3	3	3	9	3

East Zone

Group F

Dec 13 – Singapore
Lion City Sailors (Sgp) 0
Kitchee (Hkg) 2 (Van Huizen 11 og, Fernando 74)

Dec 13 – Jeonju
Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (Kor) 3 (Moon Seon-min 42, Lee Dong-jun 76, 78)
Bangkok United (Tha) 2 (Wanchai 4, Rungrath 85)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bangkok Utd (Q)	6	4	1	1	11	8	13
Jeonbuk (Q)	6	4	0	2	12	9	12
Lion City Sailors	6	2	0	4	5	9	6
Kitchee	6	1	1	4	7	9	4

Group G

Dec 13 – Yokohama
Yokohama F. Marinos (Jpn) 3 (Elber 45+4, Anderson Lopes 57, Yan Matheus 61)
Shandong Taishan (Chn) 0

Dec 13 – Manila
Kaya–Iloilo (Phi) 1 (Rota 53)
Incheon United (Kor) 3 (Park Seung-ho 12, Choi Woo-jin 25, Kim Do-hyuk 90+4 pen)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Yokohama (Q)	6	4	0	2	12	7	12
Shandong Taishan (Q)	6	4	0	2	14	7	12
Incheon United	6	4	0	2	14	9	12
Kaya-Iloilo	6	0	0	6	4	21	0

Group H

Dec 12 – Buriram
Buriram United (Tha) 2 (Arthit 48, Causic 55)
Ventforet Kofu (Jpn) 3 (Hasegawa 24, Utaka 38, 43)

Dec 12 – Melbourne
Melbourne City (Aus) 1 (Arslan 54)
Zhejiang (Chn) 1 (Mushekwi 90+9)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ventforet Kofu (Q)	6	3	2	1	11	8	11
Melbourne City	6	2	3	1	8	6	9
Zhejiang	6	2	1	3	9	13	7
Buriram United	6	2	0	4	9	10	6

Group I

Dec 12 – Buriram
Ulsan Hyundai (Kor) 2 (Adam 44, 53 pen)
Kawasaki Frontale (Jpn) 2 (Tono 17, Seko 31)

Dec 12 – Melbourne
Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas) 4 (Bergson 55 pen, 66, Endrick 86, Arif 90+2)
BG Pathum United (Tha) 1 (Sergeev 28)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kawasaki (Q)	6	5	1	0	17	6	16
Ulsan (Q)	6	3	1	2	12	8	10
Johor Darul Ta'zim	6	3	0	3	11	13	9
BG Pathum Utd	6	0	0	6	9	22	0

Group J

Dec 6 – Wuhan
Wuhan Three Towns (Chn) 1 (Lee Gyu-baeg 49 og)
Pohang Steelers (Kor) 1 (Lee Ho-jae 77)

Dec 6 – Hanoi
Hanoi (Vie) 2 (Dao Van Nam 53, Pham Tuan Hai 87)
Urawa Red Diamonds (Jpn) 1 (Linssen 65)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Pohang Steelers (Q)	6	5	1	0	14	5	16
Urawa Reds	6	2	1	3	12	9	7
Hanoi	6	2	0	4	7	16	6
Wuhan Three Towns	6	1	2	3	8	11	5

2023-24 AFC CUP

West Zone

Group A

Dec 12: Al Ahed (Lbn) 2-1 Al Fotuwa (Syr)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Nahda (Q)	4	3	0	1	6	4	9
Al Ahed (Q)	4	2	0	2	5	5	6
Al Fotuwa	4	1	0	3	3	5	3
Jabal Al Mukaber*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

**Withdrew*

Group B

Dec 11: Al Wehdat (Jor) 1-1 Al Kuwait (Kuw); Al Kahrabaa (Irq) 3-1 Al Ittihad (Syr)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Kahrabaa (Q)	6	4	1	1	10	5	13
Al Wehdat	6	3	1	2	10	7	10
Al Kuwait	6	1	4	1	5	5	7
Al Ittihad	6	0	2	4	3	11	2

Group C

Dec 12: Al Zawraa (Irq) 2-1 Al Riffa (Bhr); Nejmeh (Lbn) 1-2 Al Arabi (Kuw)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Riffa (Q)	6	4	1	1	15	5	13
Al Zawraa	6	3	2	1	11	7	11
Al Arabi	6	2	2	2	6	8	8
Nejmeh	6	0	1	5	4	16	1

South Zone

Group D

Dec 11: Odisha (Ind) 1-0 Bashundhara Kings (Ban); Maziya (Mdv) 1-0 Mohun Bagan (Ind)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Odisha (Q)	6	4	0	2	17	12	12
Bashundhara Kings	6	3	1	2	10	10	10
Mohun Bagan	6	2	1	3	11	11	7
Maziya	6	2	0	4	9	14	6

Central Zone

Group E

Dec 14: Ravshan Kulob (Tjk) 0-1 Altyn Asyr (Tkm); Abdysh-Ata Kant (Kgz) 8-3 Merw Mary (Tkm)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Abdysh-Ata Kant (Q)	6	5	1	0	18	6	16
Altyn Asyr	6	3	1	2	7	9	10
Merw Mary	6	0	3	3	6	13	3
Ravshan Kulob	6	0	3	3	2	5	3

ASEAN Zone

Group F

Dec 14: DH Cebu (Phi) 0-3 Macarthur (Aus); Shan United (Mya) 2-1 Phnom Penh Crown (Cam)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Macarthur (Q)	6	5	0	1	23	5	15
Phnom Penh Crown (Q)	6	4	0	2	15	7	12
DH Cebu	6	1	1	4	4	19	4
Shan United	6	1	1	4	3	14	4

Group G

Dec 13:
Terengganu (Mas) 2-0 Bali United (Idn); Stallion Laguna (Phi) 0-3 Central Coast Mariners (Aus)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Central Coast (Q)	6	4	1	1	21	7	13
Terengganu	6	3	3	0	10	6	12
Bali United	6	2	1	3	15	15	7
Stallion Laguna	6	0	1	5	9	27	1

Group H

Dec 14: Haiphong (Vie) 4-0 Hougang United (Sgp); Sabah (Mas) 1-3 PSM Makassar (Idn)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sabah (Q)	6	4	0	2	19	9	12
Haiphong	6	3	1	2	13	9	10
PSM Makassar	6	3	1	2	10	12	10
Hougang United	6	1	0	5	6	18	3

East Zone

Group I

Dec 10: Taiwan Steel (Tpe) 4-2 Chao Pak Kei (Mac)
Dec 14: Chao Pak Kei (Mac) 4-1 Taiwan Steel (Tpe); Taichung Futuro (Tpe) 1-2 Ulaanbaatar (Mng)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Taichung Futuro (Q)	6	4	0	2	8	8	12
Ulaanbaatar	6	4	0	2	7	7	12
Taiwan Steel	6	3	0	3	15	12	9
Chao Pak Kei	6	1	0	5	6	9	3

BHUTAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Paro (C)	18	16	1	1	79	14	49
Thimphu City	18	13	3	2	65	25	42
Transport United	18	12	1	5	68	29	37
RTC	18	11	2	5	40	22	35
Druk Lhayul	18	8	1	9	47	54	25
Tensung	18	7	1	10	31	36	22
BFF Academy U19	18	4	5	9	30	45	17
Ugyen Academy	18	3	6	9	30	50	15
Thimphu Raven	18	3	1	14	18	68	10
Namlha	18	2	1	15	15	80	7

MALAYSIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Johor Darul Ta'zim (C)	26	25	1	0	100	7	76
Selangor	26	20	1	5	72	22	61
Sabah	26	17	3	6	64	33	54
Kedah	26	17	2	7	52	29	53
Sri Pahang	26	13	6	7	44	33	45
Terengganu	26	11	7	8	45	34	40
Kuala Lumpur City	26	10	8	8	44	39	38
PDRM	26	11	4	11	35	37	37
Negeri Sembilan	26	6	9	11	33	49	27
Pulau Pinang	26	6	6	14	29	50	24
Perak	26	6	4	16	25	55	22
Kelantan United	26	4	5	17	29	65	17
Kuching FA	26	2	6	18	24	51	12
Kelantan	26	2	2	22	29	121	8

MYANMAR

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Shan United (C)	22	19	3	0	62	19	60
Yangon United	22	16	3	3	57	13	51
Hantharwady United	22	12	1	9	35	25	37
ISPE	22	9	5	8	38	31	32
Dagon Star United	22	9	4	9	33	31	31
Myawady	22	9	4	9	34	38	31
Mahar United	22	8	6	8	28	37	30
Rakhine United	22	7	6	9	32	38	27
Ayeyawady United	22	7	5	10	35	44	26
Yadanarbon	22	5	8	9	25	32	23
GFA (R)	22	3	3	16	22	70	12
Kachin United (R)	22	2	4	16	17	40	10

TAIWAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Taiwan Steel (C)	21	17	1	3	47	14	52
Taiwan Shihu	21	12	5	4	40	22	41
Taipower	21	10	3	8	38	24	33
AC Taipei	21	9	4	8	25	19	31
Taichung Futuro	21	8	4	9	33	31	28
Hang Yuan	21	8	3	10	25	33	27
Ming Chuan University*	21	5	4	12	19	44	19
Taipei Dragons (R)	21	2	2	17	18	58	8

**Enter relegation play-off*

TAJIKISTAN

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Istiklol	18	12	4	2	42	8	40
Ravshan Kulob	18	8	7	3	23	13	31
Kuktosh	18	9	2	7	30	25	29
Eskhata	18	8	2	8	24	28	26
Fayzkand	18	6	7	5	24	22	25
Khujand	18	5	7	6	18	26	22
Khosilot Farkhor	18	5	5	8	14	20	20
CSKA Pamir	18	4	8	6	14	14	20
Khatlon	18	5	1	12	11	33	16
Regar-TadAZ	18	3	7	8	17	28	16

Top five advance to championship round, bottom five advance to relegation round

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Istiklol (C)	22	16	4	2	56	12	52
Ravshan Kulob	22	9	8	5	29	20	35
Kuktosh	22	10	3	9	39	36	33
Eskhata	22	10	3	9	30	32	33
Fayzkand	22	6	8	8	29	36	26

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
CSKA Pamir	22	5	11	6	16	15	26
Khujand	22	5	11	6	19	27	26
Khosilot Farkhor	22	6	7	9	17	22	25
Regar-TadAZ (R)	22	5	9	8	21	30	24
Khatlon (R)	22	5	2	15	12	38	17

TURKMENISTAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Arkadag (C)	24	24	0	0	83	17	72
Altyn Asyr	24	17	3	4	57	26	54
Nebitci	24	13	4	7	41	31	43
Ahal	24	12	2	10	40	32	38
Ashgabat	24	9	3	12	35	51	30
Kopetdag	24	8	4	12	31	48	28
Energetik	24	5	2	17	16	46	17
Merw Mary	24	3	5	16	20	44	14
Sagadam	24	3	5	16	16	44	14

AFRICA

2023-24 CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group A

Dec 9 – Nouakchott
FC Nouadhibou (Mta) 0
TP Mazembe (Cod) 0

Dec 10 – Pretoria
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 0
Pyramids (Egy) 0

Dec 19 – Lubumbashi
TP Mazembe (Cod) 2 (Fofana 80, 90+4)
FC Nouadhibou (Mta) 0

Dec 19 – Cairo
Pyramids (Egy) 0
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 1 (Mokoena 17)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
TP Mazembe	4	2	1	1	3	1	7
M. Sundowns	4	2	1	1	4	1	7
Nouadhibou	4	1	1	2	2	5	4
Pyramids	4	1	1	2	1	3	4

Group B

Dec 9 – Francistown
Jwaneng Galaxy (Bot) 0
ASEC Abidjan (Civ) 2 (Karamoko 57, 79)

Dec 9 – Marrakesh
Wydad (Mar) 1 (Draoui 90+5)
Simba (Tan) 0

Dec 19 – Dar es Salaam
Simba (Tan) 2 (Onana 36, 38)
Wydad (Mar) 0

Dec 19 – Abidjan
ASEC Abidjan (Civ) 3 (Leibe 11, Aka 80, Karamoko 90+1)
Jwaneng Galaxy (Bot) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
ASEC Abidjan	4	3	1	0	7	1	10
Simba	4	1	2	1	3	2	5
Jwaneng Galaxy	4	1	1	2	1	5	4
Wydad	4	1	0	3	1	4	3

Group C

Dec 8 – Tunis
Etoile Sahel (Tun) 1 (Mbe 88)
Al Hilal (Sud) 0

Dec 9 – Tunis
Esperance (Tun) 0
Petro Atletico (Ang) 0

Dec 19 – Luanda
Petro Atletico (Ang) 0
Esperance (Tun) 0

Dec 19 – Dar es Salaam
Al Hilal (Sud) 1 (N'Diaye 43)
Etoile Sahel (Tun) 1 (Barhoumi 90+2)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Petro Atletico	4	2	2	0	3	0	8
Esperance	4	1	2	1	3	3	5
Etoile Sahel	4	1	1	2	2	5	4
Al Hilal	4	1	1	2	4	4	4

Group D

Dec 8 – Kumasi
Medeama (Gha) 1 (Sowah 27 pen)
Young Africans (Tan) 1 (Zouzoua 36)

Dec 8 – Alexandria
Al Ahly (Egy) 0
Chabab Belouizdad (Alg) 0

Dec 20 – Dar es Salaam
Young Africans (Tan) 3 (Zouzoua 33, Mwamnyeto 61, Yahya 66)
Medeama (Gha) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Ahly	3	1	2	0	4	1	5
Young Africas	4	1	2	1	5	5	5
Medeama	4	1	1	2	3	8	4
Belouizdad	3	1	1	1	4	2	4

2023-24 CAF CONFEDERATION CUP

Group A

Dec 10: Al Hilal Benghazi (Lby) 2-1 SuperSport United (RSA); USM Alger (Alg) 1-0 Future FC (Egy)
Dec 20: Future FC (Egy) 0-0 USM Alger (Alg); SuperSport United (RSA) 2-1 Al Hilal Benghazi (Lby)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
USM Alger	4	3	1	0	5	0	10
Future FC	4	2	1	1	3	2	7
Al Hilal Benghazi	4	1	0	3	4	7	3
SuperSport Utd	4	1	0	3	3	6	3

Group B

Dec 9-10: Zamalek (Egy) 1-0 Sagrada Esperanca (Ang); Abu Salim (Lby) 1-0 SOAR (Gui)
Dec 20: Sagrada Esperanca (Ang) 0-0 Zamalek (Egy); SOAR (Gui) 0-2 Abu Salim (Lby)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Zamalek	4	3	1	0	6	0	10
Abu Salim	4	3	0	1	4	1	9
Sagrada Esperanca	4	1	1	2	2	2	4
SOAR	4	0	0	4	0	9	0

Group C

Dec 10: Rivers United (Nga) 1-0 Club Africain (Tun); Academica Lobito (Ang) 2-3 Dreams FC (Gha)
Dec 20: Dreams FC (Gha) 4-0 Academica Lobito (Ang); Club Africain (Tun) 3-0 Rivers United (Nga)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Club Africain	4	3	0	1	8	2	9
Dreams FC	4	3	0	1	9	5	9
Rivers United	4	2	0	2	5	5	6
Academica Lobito	4	0	0	4	3	13	0

Group D

Dec 10: Sekhukhune United (RSA) 0-0 Stade Malien (Mli); RS Berkane (Mar) 2-0 Diables Noirs (Cog)
Dec 20: Diables Noirs (Cog) 1-1 RS Berkane (Mar); Stade Malien (Mli) 1-0 Sekhukhune United (RSA)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
RS Berkane	4	3	1	0	7	2	10
Stade Malien	4	2	1	1	5	3	7
Sekhukhune Utd	4	1	1	2	2	4	4
Diables Noirs	4	0	1	3	3	8	1

OCEANIA

COOK ISLANDS

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tupapa Maraerenga (C)	14	13	0	1	50	4	39
Nikao	15	12	1	2	46	12	37
Puaikura	13	5	2	6	18	26	17
Titikaveka	15	3	4	8	16	28	13
Avatiu	15	3	2	10	18	39	11
Matavera-Ngatangiia	14	2	1	11	10	49	7

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Hekari United* (C)	14	12	1	1	36	6	37
Port Moresby Strikers*	14	8	3	3	20	15	27
Lae City Dwellers*	14	7	3	4	25	18	24
Lae City*	14	5	6	3	15	10	21
PRK Gulf Komara	14	5	4	5	25	22	19
Morobe Wawens	14	3	5	6	13	24	14
United Highlands	14	2	4	8	22	30	10
Madang	14	0	2	12	6	37	2

*Advance to finals stage

Semi-Finals

Dec 13: Hekari United 2-1 Lae City; Port Moresby Strikers 1-2 Lae City Dwellers

Third-Place Play-Off

Dec 16: Lae City 0-1 Port Moresby Strikers

Final

Dec 16: Hekari United 1-0 Lae City Dwellers

Internationals

2023 PACIFIC GAMES

Group A

Nov 18 – Honiara
New Caledonia 7 (Waya 2, 56, 62, Vakie 5, Zeoula 16 pen, Welepane 24, Katrawa 26)
Tonga 0

Nov 21 – Honiara
Tonga 1 (Kendler 71)
Cook Islands 2 (Tiputoa 67, Rimene-Albrett 90+8)

Nov 24 – Honiara
Cook Islands 0
New Caledonia 8 (Zeoula 7, 13, Xowi 64, Waya 75, 78, 81, Katrawa 82, 90+5)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
New Caledonia (Q)	2	2	0	0	15	0	6
Cook Islands	2	1	0	1	2	9	3
Tonga	2	0	0	2	1	9	0

Group B

Nov 17 – Honiara
Papua New Guinea –
Tuvalu –
Papua New Guinea awarded a 3-0 walkover

Nov 20 – Honiara
Tuvalu 0
Vanuatu 6 (T. Kalotang 6, 53, Tenene 11, 70, Alefaio 35 og, Moses 71)

Nov 23 – Honiara
Vanuatu 1 (Soromon 52)
Papua New Guinea 1 (Kepo 45+7)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Vanuatu (Q)	2	1	1	0	7	1	4
Papua New Guinea	2	1	1	0	4	1	4
Tuvalu	2	0	0	2	0	9	0

Group C

Nov 18 – Honiara
Fiji 10 (Begg 1, Krishna 6, 8, 35, Nalaubu 18, 43, Dogalau 56, Pablo 61 og, Dunn 66, Matanisiga 82)
Northern Mariana Islands 0

Nov 21 – Honiara
Fiji 0
Tahiti 0

Nov 24 – Honiara
Northern Mariana Islands 0
Tahiti 5 (T. Tehau 30, 38 pen, Tinirauarii 43, Degrumelle 69, Kaspard 71)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Fiji (Q)	2	1	1	0	10	0	4
Tahiti	2	1	1	0	5	0	4
Northern Marianas	2	0	0	1	0	15	0

Group D

Nov 17 – Honiara
Solomon Islands 1 (Orobulu 50)
Samoa 0

Nov 20 – Honiara
Samoa 10 (Kwan 10, 49, Tumua Leo 15, 41, 54, 88, 90+7, Trainor 24 pen, Tumua 61, Taualai 80)
American Samoa 0

Nov 23 – Honiara
American Samoa 0
Solomon Islands 11 (Orobulu 6, 45+3, 72, 80, 90+3, Leslie 16, Feni 25, 41, 66, Molea 28, 34)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Solomon Islands (Q)	2	2	0	0	12	0	6
Samoa	2	1	0	1	10	1	3
American Samoa	2	0	0	2	0	21	0

9th-12th Placement Play-Offs

Nov 27 – Honiara
Northern Mariana Islands 4 (Yobech 32, R. Guerrero 46, 70, Ngewakl 90+4)
American Samoa 0

Nov 27 – Honiara
Tonga 0
Tuvalu 4 (Sapele 5, Pelekata 42, Vine 81, 84)

Nov 30 – Honiara
American Samoa 2 (Vaitoelau 37, Silao 55)
Tonga 6 (Polovili 43, 88, Fifita 47, 81, Tu'ifangaloka 61, Rajani 76 pen)
Tonga finish 11th, American Samoa finish 12th

Nov 30 – Honiara
Northern Mariana Islands 1 (Toves 50)
Tuvalu 4 (Vailine 8, 22, Ualesi 42, 45+3)
Tuvalu finish 9th, Northern Marianas finish 10th

5th-8th Placement Play-Offs

Nov 27 – Honiara
Tahiti 2 (Tinirauarii 49, Lossec 88)
Samoa 1 (Tumua 2)

Nov 27 – Honiara
Cook Islands –
Papua New Guinea –
Papua New Guinea awarded a 3-0 walkover

Nov 30 – Honiara
Samoa –
Cook Islands –
Samoa awarded a 3-0 walkover
Samoa finish 7th, Cook Islands finish 8th

Nov 30 – Honiara
Tahiti 2 (Tinirauarii 21, T. Tehau 83)
Papua New Guinea 0
Tahiti finish 5th, Papua New Guinea finish 6th

Semi-Finals

Nov 28 – Honiara
New Caledonia 1 (Xowi 45+3)
Vanuatu 0

Nov 28 – Honiara
Fiji 0
Solomon Islands 2 (Lea'i 39 pen, Lea'alafa 82)

Bronze Final

Dec 1 – Honiara
Vanuatu 2 (Soromon 28, 45+3)
Fiji 4 (Dunn 22, 55, Begg 73, Nand 90+2)

Final

Dec 2 – Honiara
New Caledonia 2 (Waya 7, Welepane 45+6)
Solomon Islands 2 (Orobulu 43, 71)
New Caledonia win 7-6 on penalties

FRIENDLIES

Dec 10 – Fort Lauderdale
Colombia 1 (Ferro 41 og)
Venezuela 0

Dec 17 – Los Angeles
Mexico 2 (Govea 40, G. Martinez 50)
Colombia 3 (Reyes 55, R. Martinez 69, Gomez 90+2)

Dec 25 – Dubai
Uzbekistan 4 (Fayzullaev 23, Amonov 53, Masharipov 55, Gaybullaev 80)
Kyrgyzstan 1 (Duyshobekov 89)

Dec 28 – Tripoli
Lebanon 2 (Haidar 23, Mansour 90+3 pen)
Jordan 1 (Al Dardour 3)

Dec 29 – Abu Dhabi
China 0
Oman 2 (A. Al Alawi 49, Al Ghassani 65)

Dec 30 – Abu Dhabi
United Arab Emirates 1 (Mabkhout 90 pen)
Kyrgyzstan 0

Dec 31 – Doha
Qatar 3 (Almoez 12, 20, 43)
Cambodia 0

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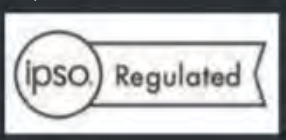

Nolberto Solano

Leeds Utd 3 Newcastle Utd 4

2001-02 Premier League, Elland Road

The former Newcastle United and Peru winger looks back on a dramatic late winning goal

Newcastle star... Nolberto Solano

"When I first moved to Newcastle, everything was new – the language, the lifestyle, the weather – it was all completely different. But the city's really close and there's only one team. There's so much passion for football and I really engaged with that. My kids were born and grew up in Newcastle, so now I feel like it's my second home.

After Ruud Gullit left in 1999, Bobby Robson built that team spirit in the dressing room. He made sure everybody arrived at the club earlier and spent more time together. He was very clear in his team talks and always knew what we needed. We had a lot of respect for him. Everything started working perfectly under him.

We really enjoyed those years. There was a lot of excitement when Bobby Robson arrived. Everybody loved him and he put together this entertaining team. We were great at attacking but defensively we weren't the best. Alan Shearer was a magnificent striker, a goalscoring machine, and Craig Bellamy gave us another option, so we didn't always have to play into Alan, who was perfect at holding the ball up and battling the centre-backs. Craig was an intelligent runner who would stretch defences and scare them with his pace in behind. It was a great mix, which is why we got a lot of good results. They made it easy for us as midfielders and both of them scored that day.

This was probably one of the best periods of my career because we had so much quality on the field. Great players like Laurent Robert, Kieron Dyer and Gary Speed. We'd had a fantastic pre-season, so our fitness was really good, and we were physical. That allowed us to express ourselves. We had so many people who could score goals, myself included.

This game was really special, but it was difficult too. Leeds had a very strong side and were fighting with us to get in the top four. We were losing 3-1 in the second half, which felt unfair because we'd played well but they'd taken their chances. We still felt we could turn the game around and beat them, and that's what happened.

I got the winner in the 90th minute.

Late winner...Solano scores at Elland Road

I remember Bellamy winning the ball in the middle. He got caught with a tackle, but the referee let play carry on. Dyer picked up the second ball and I knew he'd play it to me, so I ran in behind Leeds left-back, Ian Harte. When I was through on goal, I didn't see Alan in the area, so I knew I had to finish the chance myself. I found the far corner and it was an amazing moment.

That win meant we were top going into Christmas, but Manchester United and Arsenal were two extraordinary sides, the strongest in the league at the time. They both had wonderful players. We knew it would be really tough until the end of the season, but we battled together. Although we couldn't maintain our title challenge, we were very happy to finish in the top four and compete in the Champions League again. We felt so proud to bring that back. We deserved it."

Interview by Sean Cole

> There was a lot of excitement when Bobby Robson arrived. Everybody loved him and he put together this entertaining team

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